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WESTCOAST LIGHTING INSIDER

Passamonte Green: Lighting Designers Are Storytellers First

by Lois I. Hutchinson | Jan 15, 2019 | WCLI Feature Article | 3 comments



With a rich history in lighting design for architecture, entertainment, and everything in between, [Visual Terrain](#) celebrates storytelling. Principal Designer and CEO Lisa Passamonte Green cultivates a wide variety of clients and project types by discovering the stories they want to tell. "Even our traditional architectural projects tend to have an immersive quality, or we find a way to bring an immersive quality to them," said Passamonte Green. "If we're lighting a bank lobby there is still an immersive quality to our lighting, because we want to immerse you in lighting that is safe and clean and bright. It makes you feel comfortable to get your money out of the ATM, or interact with staff at the bank. But if we're lighting the *Revenge of the Mummy* attraction, we don't want you to feel clean and safe. We want the lighting to immerse you in the story, which is shadowy and scary and foreboding."



Lighting design is experiential and is inadequately represented here in photos from the Visual Terrain portfolio. Beginning in theatrical lighting design back in college, Passamonte Green rebels against those who see lighting design as merely a technical discipline. *Technology is the brush through which I express my art.* This is her mantra whenever she comes up against a colleague from another discipline who doesn't understand the value of lighting design in storytelling. And there's one on every project, she finds.

"Our firm will be 24 years old in February, and I've learned over those 24 years that each project is a chance to convert someone. To allow them to see what lighting can be." Often the "antagonist" is the cost estimator of a project. "Lighting is so difficult for people to quantify. Sometimes you know that you don't feel comfortable in a space, but you don't realize it's because the lighting is not correct. And when it's correct, nobody notices it because they feel comfortable."



Ft. Worth Children's Museum at the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History

Sometimes it's a client that needs to be convinced that lighting can tell the story; that it can help people see the space as it is meant to be seen. The Visual Terrain team was brought in just 10 days before the opening of the Ft. Worth Children's Museum, after the lighting was already installed. "We basically redesigned all of the spaces then re-hung and refocused all of the light fixtures. We tried to elevate the experience based on how the existing technology was used," Passamonte Green recounted.

Shadows and pattern projectors brought the fun to what had been a boxy, traditional architectural space with large blank walls. "We really want to play on the fact that these are kids! And really immerse them in their own museum, in their space," she added "We transformed it into a more engaging, kid-friendly, kid-celebrating space."





Colusa Casino

This restaurant at the Colusa Casino Resort provides a respite from the raucous casino floor. Friendly and warm: that's its vibe, its story, Passamonte Green explained.

"The interior architecture and the lighting just complement each other, and it's comfortable. But not so comfortable that people want to hang out all day in it." Pendants and other lighting cues guide patrons through the space, and there's a comfortable softness to the lighting.



Beyond All Boundaries

The *Beyond All Boundaries* 4D experience could have been just a screening room showing archival footage from World War II – the film presents a story. But here the audiovisual medium is combined with 3D set pieces and powerful, dynamic lighting to immerse the audience. "In a scene that focuses on the horrors of the concentration camps, this three-dimensional guard tower rises out of the floor. We put a spotlight on a motor on the guard tower to mimic the searchlights that might have been used at that time, and at a key moment in the story it begins to search the audience. All of a sudden you go from being a passive viewer of the media to completely immersed and you're in the concentration camp. The rest of the lighting creates a shadowy nighttime feel, but when that searchlight hits audience members, it jolts them into the whole experience," Passamonte Green explained.

The kinetic effect draws the audience in but evokes the opposite of comfort, making WWII more accessible and relevant to generations who have no personal connection to the conflict. "Without the audience fully realizing it, they're reacting emotionally, and that reaction is largely being caused by the story and how the lighting is supporting it."

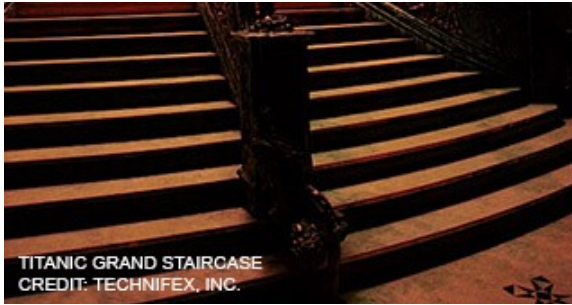


Chrysler Dodge in Dubai Festival City

This auto showroom could have been undertaken as a conventional project with lighting to make the cars look fabulous. But notice that the continuous lines of fluorescent form a dynamic, jagged profile, bringing the off-road indoors.

"They're hung low and high in a pattern that mimics the mountains and hills that the Jeeps travel on when they off-road. It's kinetic without being kinetic," she described. "We did five automotive showrooms [there], and each one of them has a different lighting scheme that responds to the story of that brand, as well as the experience of the architecture."





Titanic Grand Staircase

Blacklight and dynamic, watery pattern projectors transform the romantic grand staircase of James Cameron's *Titanic: The Experience* into a sunken wreck. Strategic accent lighting hides the broken statuary, until the moment in the story when it illustrates the tragedy.

"Visitors may be immersed in the architecture and the building, but they engage differently with different pieces of it based on what the lighting is showing them, or how we're guiding them through the space. And where we place a shadow is just as important as where we place light."

Passamonte Green sees "layering light" as a bit of a trope and talks about lighting strategies more in terms of scripting. "We're telling a story in a very short time period. It's all a part of that and we pick and choose when people are passive viewers and when we're immersing them." In the same way retail lighting draws focus and leads customers through a store, "what you want to do is keep them engaged, appropriately engaged."



Dollywood Emporium

Passamonte Green has a variety of tools to engage visitors, even when the architecture doesn't particularly facilitate that. Merchandise – and in a way, customers – became lost in this two-story retail space at the Dollywood amusement park. Visual Terrain convinced management that lighting alone could "lower the ceiling," making the space more intimate and inviting, and still lend excitement. The team created a ceiling of festoon lighting with track lighting just above. The track fixtures are closer to the merchandise, so products are accurately highlighted.

"Lesley Wheel showed me how planes of light can create a visual boundary and make a space feel more intimate and upscale. At Dollywood we used the existing space, without making significant architectural changes, and really elevated the shopping experience for the guest."



Revenge of the Mummy

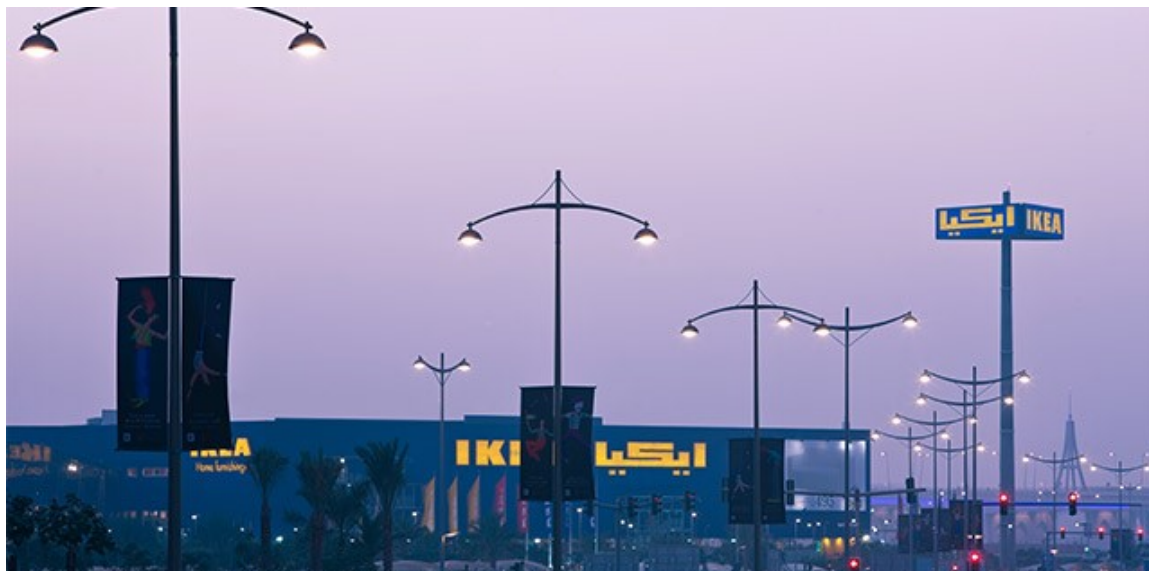


At the *Revenge of the Mummy: The Ride* queue at Universal Studios Florida, Passamonte Green uses brightnesses, angles of light and color contrast to draw focus and create intimacy. "By making the lighting within the queue more focused and from sources that are low, it does help make that whole queue line feel more intimate, almost claustrophobic. It's a tomb, after all."



REVENGE OF THE MUMMY
CREDIT: DAVID PAUL GREEN

The sculptural moment in the script is accented from above in cool blue. "The Anubis pops in the foreground because it's not the same color or level of lighting or the same angle as the queue."






Dubai Festival City


On the final stop of our tour through her portfolio, Passamonte Green showed lighting instruments as sculptural statements in Dubai Festival City. Visual Terrain was asked to review the 1600 acre site lighting plan, developed by others, using off-the-shelf streetlighting. Working with the owner, it became clear that story and branding were both important, even in the roadway lighting. "Ken Daniel and I set off to try to solve that, and we ended up creating a family of 13 different pedestrian and roadway poles." (Daniel left Visual Terrain in 2014.)

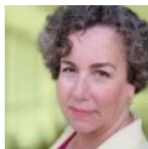
Heading into the commercial district, the lighting standards are "arms-up," open and higher energy. In the residential districts the arms-down shape has a more relaxed feel. Though the light levels and color temperature do not change, "shape has an energy and a flow to it. Roadway lighting doesn't have to be so utilitarian that it's always ugly. It can be daytime sculpture and nighttime lighting. That's part of the story we told at Dubai Festival City."



Author's note: This article sprang from a panel discussion that Lisa Passamonte Green contributed to at the Themed Entertainment Association's 2017 SATE conference (Storytelling + Architecture + Technology = Experience). Her portion of the presentation was a fairly elaborate production that transformed the room, demonstrating experientially how lighting design can evoke an emotional response and contribute to storytelling. Check out the [TEA video on YouTube](#).

 About the Author

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About Lois I. Hutchinson

Lois I. Hutchinson is a freelance writer specializing in lighting and energy issues. She is also the content marketing mastermind behind Inverse Square LLC, a Los Angeles-based consultancy. Contact her via lightinginsider@exponation.net with your comments and any article ideas that concern the lighting community here in the Southwest.

Comments are subject to approval.

3 Comments



Aussie Kizirian on January 15, 2019 at 4:04 pm

Great read! Thank you and keep up the great articles.

Reply



Bridget Williams on January 15, 2019 at 5:27 pm

Excellent!

Reply



Lois I. Hutchinson on January 28, 2019 at 4:12 pm

Thanks for the kind words. Send any ideas you have for articles my way.

Reply



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