

Could architainment lure consumers back to shopping centres?

Developers, architects and shopping centres are under increasing pressure, due to the rise of ecommerce, to draw customers back to the physical retail environment. Beyond that, they need to ensure consistent, solid traffic all year round and keep consumers in centres for longer to facilitate greater spending.



A trend that is unfolding as a means to address the online threat to centres is the use of architainment which is generally described as when architectural lighting and entertainment lighting come together.

According to Johnny Scholtz from DWR – a local lighting distributor - it's a process in which inanimate objects like buildings are given an entertainment value using light, media, kinetic or other mediums, thus giving it a dual purpose. "The development of technology, in particular LED lighting, has increased the potential of and brought this relatively new discipline to life," says Scholtz.

International examples

High profile examples of architainment on a global stage include the Empire State Building which has been fitted with colour changing LED fixtures that change the building lighting at will. The lighting is also themed to reflect hallmark events like the festive season and sometimes the light and projected designs are even synchronised to music. Another example is the way the Sydney Opera House has been given a new life with the use of dynamic lighting, while in Finland an installation called Valokaivo resembles a water well, with undulating blue light as a background. It uses light and motion sensors to respond to people walking on top of the well with white waves.

Specialist architectural lighting designer Paul Pamboukian believes architainment is best described as themed subject matter, mainly introduced into retail design, with the objective of creating "fun" spaces to attract public attention and participation. "In SA, instead of employing gimmicky tactics that date really quickly, I believe we are moving into a stage where designers and developers are opting for environments that are more architectural and themes that are more toned down and subtle," says Pamboukian.

Interactive installations

Locally, shopping centres are increasingly using LED technology to light exterior and interior features, their gardens and

musical fountains. Scholtz says different coloured lights are being used and more interactive installations are being implemented. “Lights that are triggered, either to come on or to change colour when you walk past motion sensors is becoming more common,” he says. “Restaurants are also using lighting to create a theatrical experience around food.”

Adding to this, Pamboukian says that in general, mall lighting has become much brighter and many shopping centres are using more indirect lighting from coves, with some feature lighting in dedicated focal areas. “In general, down lighting is not as popular as it was and one can say that the use of light has become more architectural than utilitarian.”

Most of the pioneering architectural lighting designers had their origins in theatre and so theatrical lighting techniques have infiltrated purely engineering solutions. This, Pamboukian says, is especially true with LED technology where colour change and gobo break up patterns have become easy and practical to use.

Colour mixing

Both Pamboukian and Scholtz agree that LED has dominated all things lighting and this technology has inspired several trends, including more flexibility in getting light into tight, narrow spaces where architectural details can be highlighted with relative ease. Colour mixing is far easier with LED and this has facilitated movement in light, while lighting control is fast becoming a standard requirement, even in residential projects. A big positive is energy saving and, although initially a more expensive investment, LED lighting allows for massive savings on running costs and maintenance. Light and health have become very topical and there is interesting research into how light can affect circadian cycles, both positively and negatively.

LED technology has also provided the means to mix primary colours such as red, blue green, amber or white to create any number of colours and tints, however, an important innovation in this field is “tuneable white”. This is where different tones of white are mixed, from very cool to incandescent whites that may change to complement the different times of day and night.

Not limited to retail, corporate offices are also lighting up their buildings to ensure a presence at night. Scholtz says in this case they treat the building as a set – as if it were a theatrical backdrop and then use light to bring creative concepts to life: “We can totally change the face of a building, giving it multiple facades by using different angles, colour temperatures, and colours. The eye is always drawn to that which is brightest and this is how we make sure focal points on a building get the attention they deserve.”

Light pollution

With sustainability an increasing focus for all industries, Pamboukian says that while architainment and the use of architectural lighting are on the rise, light pollution is an essential consideration for any lighting designer. “Light pollution is defined as when we emit more and more uncontrolled light scatter into our night sky. This affects animal and plant life, as well as our views of the night sky. We are lighting out the night and therefore we pay huge attention to this.”

The same architectural lighting principles hold for interior lighting where it is used to light art, create an ambience, an experience, entertainment and a particular atmosphere, but according to Scholtz, all too often in the South African context, budgets limit what can be achieved. “We have access to the same technology and have incredible skill in our country but the share of wallet when it comes to lighting is just not the same as internationally.”

No longer the domain of electricians, lighting and lighting design has become a specialised field that is as theatrical as it is practical.

Practical demonstrations of architainment and what light can do in a creative environment, will be available at the B2B technology trade show Mediatech in Johannesburg, 19-21 July. For more info, go to www.mediatech.co.za.

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