

## :: Lume Arquitetura Magazine - # 11 issue

### Interview: Kai Piippo by Maria Clara de Maio



Last September, **Kai Piippo** lighting designer from Stockholm and also Director of International Development for the European Lighting Designers' Association - ELDA +, came to Brazil to participate in the 7th Lighting Design conference that took place in São Paulo and which was attended by more than 400 professional lighting designers, architects, interior designers, engineers and several lighting companies executives.

Piippo presented some lectures on the theme of lighting design and indicated the international perspectives for the discipline. He also had important meetings with lighting designers in Brazil, such as AsBAI - Brazilian Lighting Architects' Association and found time in his busy schedule to give an interview to Lume Arquitetura about ELDA +, lighting design, Brazilian and European markets, and how he sees the future of this fascinating profession.

*LUME: Explain a little bit about ELDA+ for us.*

KAI: ELDA+ is a non-profit organization for independent lighting designers. Our aim is to establish the lighting design profession worldwide. This means working to install and support quality education programs and helping members to become better professionals. ELDA+ has a world-renowned Workshop Program, which helps train young designers and gives great visibility to lighting design as a key factor in the design of architecture and architectural spaces. So far ELDA+ has organized 11 large-scale workshops, plus six more workshops in four different countries in Europe. These have involved 50 different designers and over 600 participants. We have also organized 30 large seminars with fairs in European cities. In November, ELDA celebrated its 10th anniversary in Switzerland. Since 1994, membership has risen to over 300 members in 42 countries. And we've actually changed our name from ELDA to ELDA +. Our motto is "Realising the lighting design profession worldwide".

*L: Why plus?*

K: To show that we are more than we started out to be. And that we can now offer our members more services and benefits. Our work and contacts have taken us out of Europe. We are active in Mexico and would really like to develop more contacts in Latin America.

*L: And how does ELDA + work inside and outside Europe nowadays?*

K: Within Europe we hold meetings and conferences in as many different countries as possible with the aim of building up a presence there. Even if we only have one member in a given country, we maintain close contact and listen to that member to establish how the association can strengthen his chances of

recognition as a lighting professional. We have many members outside Europe and we try to support their activities in their respective countries whenever we can. This means understanding different markets around the world and finding ways to promote lighting design through our active members. As I said before, one of our main goals is to establish the profession, which means working with universities to establish education programs. Today, the lighting design profession doesn't really exist in the same way as that of a dentist, a doctor or a carpenter does - it isn't really established as a profession. And now we are working to make this happen. For this, we understand that education is crucial. So 50% of all money generated from membership fees and from our sponsors, ELDA+ invests on education. I'd say this is our number 1 priority.

*L: Talking about priorities, which are ELDA's priorities in Brazil?*

K: First of all, it is important to make it clear that the ELDA+ association doesn't want to go to countries and tell them what to do. We want to understand the situation for the lighting designer here and offer support by showing interest in current developments. So, our priorities will come from you, from Brazilian colleagues who approach ELDA+ with a view to collaboration in some way. In these three days in Brazil, I realize there is a high demand for education. I think this is an area where ELDA+ may be able to help. The lighting designers in Brazil want to become more professional. Through education at university level and by showing examples of what we have fought for, we would like to help establish more professionalism and recognition of lighting professionals.

*L: During your visit to Brazil you had a meeting with ASBAI. How did it go? What did you decide about future cooperation between ELDA and ASBAI?*

K:, I first met some AsBAI members in Frankfurt, at Light+ Building. In this second meeting in Brazil, we did not reach any concrete decisions, but shared information about how the Brazilian lighting design market works. Now, AsBAI will write a summary of this meeting and indicate in what way ELDA+ can cooperate with AsBAI and with Brazilian lighting designers.

*L: In other countries, have you already made some partnership of cooperation in the field of education?*

K: Yes, we have ELDA+ members in other countries and for instance we have helped them to start education at university level. It is one very big part of creating the new profession. With AsBAI, for instance, we want to plan a seminar together next year.

*L: Will it be an international seminar with members of ELDA+ from around the world participating?*

K: Yes, it should definitely be international. I see the program comprising two different parts on two days. On one day there could be a large conference for several hundred people, and the second day professional lighting designers could hold tutorials with smaller groups. So we might have seminars for a few people with five or six rooms with different topics. One topic might be

professional ethics, for instance.

AsBAI and ELDA+ both need to think about this and define what would be most effective.

*L: Don't you feel that sometimes the professionals here see ELDA+ as something that is coming to take something over?*

K: I certainly hope not. It is just the opposite, in fact. It is not the way we work. WE don't see ourselves as missionaries. What we are interested in are long-term relationships, working relationships that will bring the whole process forward in a way that the country can handle at its own pace. The interest, the idea should come from Brazil not from us. What we do is networking; we would like to create a network in Latin America to include Mexico, Brazil, Chile and so on.

I'd say South America and Latin America. Because you have a common culture and understand the local conditions. Maybe our Brazilian colleagues will want to do something specific to promote the lighting profession. They know they can share these aims with us and that we will be glad to back them up if they wish. There is strength in numbers. We have some experience of collaborating in this way in Mexico.

*L: Back to your experience as a lightning designer and as an ELDA+ director, do you believe that, as a professional, the lighting experience in other countries - with regard to natural light, and the lighting culture - is all the same?*

K: Different lighting cultures are born from our different experiences of daylight. The economic situation and political situations, for instance, also make lighting designers different. However, the profession is the same wherever we are. If we are in China, in Africa, in Europe or in South America. The problems of the designers are the same. There is a profession out there, but we have to establish it. I have described for my clients on a daily basis what I do, what a lighting designer does. So we do not only "we create lighting designs". We have to explain and promote what we do, even to our clients. They don't sometimes understand or know what I do. This is a common problem worldwide. Clients want light but they don't know what services a lighting designer can offer.

*L: Do you think it happens because lightning design is something new all over the world?*

K: It is not really new. It is assumed new. We have developed the lighting design profession through electric light, I mean since the invention of the electric light source. It's very new compared with architecture. Daylight design has been a part of architectural design for millennia, of course. But lighting design as we know it today is not yet a profession in its own right; although there have been people doing it.

*L: Professionally?*

K: Yes, professionally. Now we have gathered together and are forming associations in an effort to gain recognition for the profession.

*L: Since ELDA was founded, you mean?*

K: Yes, since ELDA and also IALD (International Association of Lighting Designers). ELDA is turning 10 years, but IALD is 35 years old.

*L: In your opinion as a professional - which is the best education to become a lighting designer? What's the best way to start? You started in stage lighting.*

K: Yes, I started in stage lighting. I don't think there is one way to describe the best background. I know some great lighting designers. Their work is extremely artistic, but they are not artists. Their background may be architecture, stage lighting or electrical engineering.

We have a common interest in this vision; we are very interested in vision. The word theater comes from Greek "teatro" and it means to look intensively. That's the actual meaning of the word. We are interested in perception and creating a good visual environment.

One of the best ways to learn about lighting is to gain practical experience with luminaries. I advise young people to find education programs that involve practical work in the course as well as theory.

*L: Do you think that technology now makes projects easier? It seduces the lighting designers? How dangerous is that, do you think?*

K: New technologies give us a lot of new possibilities. It's good but we have to be very sure what we want to do with it. It gives us three essential ideas: new kind of ways of design, the integration of small light sources into architecture, and a whole new perspective of design. It is a very good thing. But there is a danger of being seduced by color filters, especially blue filters! Sometimes, conventional technologies are more acceptable. For example, we still have the 60 watt light bulb. And this is the most bought light bulb on earth. This is because everybody understands it, it's cheap and it has existed for 100 years - so it must be good ...

I think the lighting manufacturers should ask lighting designers first before they develop new technologies. We are the ones at the forefront of design. We can say what kind of technologies we would like to see developed.

*L: What advice would you give to new architects or interior designers starting out in the profession as lighting designers?*

K: What I say at my seminars is that the lighting design profession and architecture take a long time to learn when you practice it. In the schools you learn faster. You make designs fast. But in real life you make a decision today and in two years' time you will see the end result. You should have a lot of experience with the new light sources. Make lighting trials. Look at your work as much as possible. Learn from what you see. And it is not only light sources, by the way. It is also control systems and what they can do.

*L: But lighting design is not only about electrical control systems or electric light. There are many ways of working with natural light, aren't there?.*

K: Yes. And it is very easy to be seduced by control systems, not only by new light sources. The problem with new control systems technology is that it lacks a humanistic way of making things work. When you go into people's houses, they all have on-off light switches on the wall. Everybody knows this, because in our generation we have known this since we were born. And now it is also possible to control light through touch panels, computer screens, or by voice. This is much more complex so you have to make the interface understandable. It has to be especially easy and clear because people are not used to new interfaces. So lighting control manufacturers should make lighting control systems much easier.

*L: And don't you think that this much technology disturbs the feelings you have? You said you have to feel nature, to see nature, to see the light in nature and then see your. And then there is all this technology. Is it not difficult combine them?*

K: I think that this is the essence of our profession: the knowledge that we have means that we can understand the technology, and therefore we can control the technology. This is the essence of a good project. That's what we do, we control technology, and we control the light so we create what we want. The technology shouldn't take control over us. We have to control it. It is very easy to be lost in new technology. But we have to learn it and we have to tame it.

*L: When you show us your project during your lecture you always say, "it is quite simple". Define "quite simple".*

K: It is technically simple. It is technically very simple. There are very few features, very few luminaires in my design and that sounds technically quite simple and quite cheap to produce. But the hardest thing is to find the right idea, in the right place and at the right time - that's the hard thing. That's what takes time. My style is not to make it technically complicated. Because it should be useful, it should be easy to control and so on. I have designed projects where I've learned that I should not make it technically difficult because it doesn't work in reality.

So, "quite simple" means technically simple, very clear, it is like a diamond, very clear, a very crystal clear idea, which works 100%. And the difficult thing is to make the idea come true in the project. Sometimes the difficult thing is to make it 100%. It's easy to make it 97% but the last 3% is the hardest thing to produce. And it is all that is necessary for any business at all. To be 3% better than your competitors. Only 3%, that's enough. If you are 3% better than your competitors you are the winner. You are the one who leads. When you are the most tired, when you are the most stressed, when you are under the most pressure, you have to push yourself to make those 3%.

*L: One of your presentations in Brazil was about Nordic light and Nordic Light Hotel. Explain a little bit more for us. We are a tropical country and Nordic light is something very distant from us. How can lighting designers use this experience in their projects here?*

K: Of course, in Nordic countries, we have very high highs and very low lows. It is very dark and it is very bright. There is very much contrast, a lot of contrast in the way you live your life because what you feel on an annual basis in the winter and in the summer is totally different. It is much more different than in other places, we are very much affected by the seasons. Our mood is affected. We change a lot. Our moods change, when you walk the streets in Scandinavia and the sun arrives in the spring and the light returns, people stop. Stop and just look at the sun and just feel the warmth. This make us sensitive towards light. Our sensitivity and perception I think have developed because we have the seasons very defined. In Stockholm, for example, we have six hours of daylight in December and eighteen and a half hours in June.

I showed it in Brazil because you can see your own light culture here. If you see a difference you can understand your own. I had this feeling when I listened to a lecture in Milan by Francesco Iannone and he talked about northern light cultures and southern. But he had Italy as North and Africa as South. And it was very interesting and from that I got this inspiration about talking about the lightning in Scandinavia because I see this, for me it is Nordic. For me Italy is south. But he sees beyond this, he sees Africa as south, which is absolutely correct. So to see something different can make you understand and appreciate your own culture more. When I travel around the world I appreciate my hometown even more because I understand how good it is.

I also want to give this idea to my audiences, because I want to promote Nordic light as a phenomenon, as an inspiration. It gives inspiration and knowledge.

*L: And do you really believe that we here in Brazil, in a tropical country, can we really get something from Nordic light?*

K: It's actually about understanding the meaning of light for our lives. The natural light you experience here in Brazil is what shapes your lives. If you ever have the chance to go to Scandinavia, whether it is winter time or summer time, you will experience Nordic light for yourself. The light and life in Scandinavia are totally different from here. And when you see something that is totally different, you understand your own life and situation better. As I always say: light is life; life is light, since the beginning.