

Rambusch

THE NEXT GENERATION

A collection of projects from
the last 25 years

Design Coming to Light

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FIES, HON. FCIBSE, FIALD (1935 - 2023)

Light is one of the most powerful tools in the architectural designer's repertoire. It is a tool whose development began in earnest in the 20th century; its judicious use can take us far beyond mere visibility or satisfying minimum standards. It can transcend the ordinary to orchestrate visual composition and form through illusive movement of the static, enhancement through color and the choreography of mood and atmosphere.

Light gives internal rhythm to life through external cues, regulating our days, nights and seasons. Light defines time in atomic clocks. It can flatter, soothe, stimulate, conceal or reveal. It can ensure safety on the factory floor and create islands of calm in a hectic office. It can alter our perceptions of place, comfort and security. It is hard to conceive of any architectural space that does not use light as a structural element.

I consider light to be visually evaluated radiation, a very narrow band of the electromagnetic spectrum. Light exists because we see it. Yet devoid of form or intention, such as the light from our sun—the source of all life—it falls equally upon all things without order or hierarchy, as pervasive as a fog. If we light everything, we light nothing. Light allows us to see. Lighting design, however, allows us to see what we wish to see.

With the coming of electric, non-flame illumination, Rambusch was one of the first firms to design true lighting solutions. Emerging from the era of kerosene lamps, gaslight, and electric arcs, company founder, Frode Rambusch, first recognized that the new filament light sources should be controlled for people to function easily and without distraction, to navigate safely, and above all, to preserve their ability to see beyond the brightly lighted fixtures of the day.

When I began my apprenticeship with pioneer lighting designer Stanley McCandless, Rambusch had already been in existence for more than half a century. Now 125 years in business, the company is still bringing the designer's vision to life, allowing clients to see the environments they wish for. Clients are our partners in the design process, and with every new job they are the ones who define what we call "good lighting."

How does good lighting design happen? McCandless felt that light had four measurable attributes: intensity, color, distribution, and movement. Light also fulfilled four subjective functions: it provided visibility, revealed form, established composition, and created atmosphere. These functions are personal; they vary by individual and are independent of any light source, technology, or style. Understanding the influence of these attributes on perception allows us to design the experiences we wish to see.

An exceptional example of this would be the process and dialogue between Rambusch and my firm, H.M. Brandston and Partners, as we jointly developed a remarkable optical system for the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Its Decorative Arts Wing contains a superb sequence of period rooms designed by architect Thierry Despont. These rooms were visual proof that almost every element of the past could be presented accurately by using historical precedent to curate the furnishings typically found within them. There was one exception: the lighting.

If I could approximate the same light of that period, I would encourage visitors to take an imaginative leap several centuries back in time. Creative lighting can learn a great deal from the arts. Respective of the décor, the rooms called only for an occasional highlight or touch-up for interest and focus. Imagination would supply the rest. These museum rooms were to portray pre-electric environments, and I did not want to see row upon row of modern accent fixtures hanging from period ceilings like so many bats. My solution called for a new type of concealed luminaire approximating the intimacy of candlelight without sacrificing the clarity required by visiting scholars and antiquarians.

Edwin Rambusch collaborated closely with us, experimenting with my conceptual design in a full-scale mockup of one quarter of a gallery room built in the Rambusch workshops. They produced full-size hand drawings showing every period chandelier, candelabra and bracket in place so we could understand what it was like to experience the light people lived in during previous centuries.

Rambusch employed high-tech to build a unique luminaire creating a low-tech impression. The result was, I believe, an important breakthrough in museum illumination.

The Rambusch multi-functional fixture was set flush with the ceiling, and completely hidden, providing fully-adjustable wall washing, downlighting, accent lighting, variable beam spreads, and UV protection—all focused through one minuscule aperture. By intentionally dimming the incandescent lamps, we approximated the aura of fire and candlelight—my primary goal.

Informed by art and science, this Rambusch optical system created the reality of place I had envisioned with the client. That reality is found in what we see: the design beautifully presents the glow of the paintings, the contours of the porcelain, the textures of the fabrics, the gleam of antique wood and Georgian silver, all within the trappings of a bygone era. Wherever you look, the past is present. And perhaps for a fleeting moment, the past is yours.

So much early lighting information and aesthetic advice has been lost to time, which is a shame. As timeless examples of superb lighting within our grasp today, the projects in these pages demonstrate a fundamental understanding of the history, the art, the science, and the light itself woven through this company's history. Foremost, these environments are both comfortable and beautiful. They are beautiful because they are appropriate to the space and its use.

Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us: "From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all." Our thoughts, emotions, personal history and experience have total influence over what and how we see. We literally create our world, and the currency through which we engage is light.

I would imagine it impossible to fully account for the vast array of projects Rambusch has completed, the stunning interiors revived, all the clients served, and the collective inspiration derived from their fine work. Singular, however, is that Rambusch has always maintained an acute sensitivity to the ways people truly experience a space, understanding that no single solution will fit all. Their fixtures are still hand-built and of the highest quality.

The following section of Rambusch lighting projects shows us how their work tells stories. It attests to our values and theirs as well. These environments reveal and define us, and the work of our generation now becomes part of the future.

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