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A Conversation with Gerald Olesker

Lighting Designer Preaches Importance of Collaboration in Architecture

By ELEANOR SCHRADER (Star Patcher) August 18, 2015

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(Another in an occasional series of conversations with L.A.'s leading architects and designers)

When [Gerald Olesker](#) was an architecture student at Cal Poly Pomona, his professors would wonder why he would include lighting fixtures in his drawings. Gerald would soon find out that in architecture, the attitude toward lighting was often scornful.

“Lighting? That’s not design,” Gerald recalls was a typical response to the specialized field.

Twenty-plus years later, having designed and manufactured lighting for more than \$3 billion in real estate and having secured transactions with major cities, Fortune 500 company owners, hundreds of celebrities and several military installations, Gerald has proven the skeptics wrong.

But he’s not interested in gloating – instead, he has preached the gospel of collaboration in architecture. Without the trades, he says, all architecture has is a picture.

“It’s the collaborators – contractors, stone masons, industrial and product designers and so on – who make architects look good,” Gerald says.

In fact, the tag line for his [Architectural Detail Group, Inc. & ADG Eco Lighting](#) (based in Agoura Hills and Newport Beach) is: “A collaborative group enhancing the built environment’s needs through positive relationships.”

The depth and breadth of his experience – as well as the beauty and range of his lighting fixtures – can be found on his [website](#). His clients have included such celebrities as Denzel Washington, Steven Spielberg and Dustin Hoffman, as well as major sports figures such as former Dodger Shawn Green and ice hockey star Wayne Gretzky. And he has compiled a long and impressive list of [testimonials from happy customers](#).

At the beginning of this year, Gerald launched a bimonthly digital magazine, [20/Twenty Architectural and Beyond](#). Its most recent issue – the “Spring Training” issue for its spotlight on three professional baseball players’ homes – has an eclectic and wide-ranging selection of articles and columns, including features on the use of rustic wood, the architecture of a ballet, and making a home sexy. It’s chock full of images and it spotlights a wide range of voices in the architecture and design field.

Why did you launch *20/Twenty*?

To spotlight the importance of collaboration in architecture. Each issue focuses on what we call “Visions and Voices” and implicitly asks the question: What happens if there are no trades in architecture and design?

Why is lighting important?

For some reason even as an architecture student back in the 80’s I was adding light fixtures onto my buildings. If you look at the work of some of my favorite masters – Louis Kahn (*Design is not making beauty, beauty emerges from selection, affinities, integration, love*), Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (*I don’t want to be interesting. I want to be good.*), the firm of McKim, Meade & White (who used E. F. Caldwell Co. to design fixtures), all have one thing in common. The design intentions were to create good architecture. Architecture that responded to the soul is how I see it.

I enjoy participating in the architectural process. Lighting is functional detail. Without it, it is dark, and with it, it must be part of the architecture – not just applied ornament. At ADG Lighting we have the opportunity to work with great clients and to design and manufacture lighting that responds to the architecture.

What distinguishes ADG from other companies?

My initial desire when I was just starting my architecture career was to become a better architect and to meet more architects and designers by going door to door. It made me one of the best lighting and functional ornamental designers in the world.

I am so appreciative of meeting the best in the world and working on their projects. What distinguishes ADG is that we have created couture lighting designs for more than \$3 billion of real estate worldwide. We have time and experience, and of course we love what we do at ADG.

Your average client – what do they know or think about lighting? How do you educate them?

Oddly, I think that most clients – owners, designers and architects – only know what has been presented to them from reps knocking on their doors or from the Internet. I always take the educational approach and share that lighting fixture design is really a part of the overall design process. We (collectively everyone) only know what we can reference. And that is not how we design – and that is why designing decorative lights as part of the project makes for a better project and that is why we (ADG) get hired.

Construction lawyer Larry Rothstein describes you as a “cross between Al Gore and Thomas Edison.” What does he mean by that?

Well, I definitely take that as a compliment. Al Gore is environmentally conscious and strives to promote innovation. While I prefer Tesla over Edison, certainly, without Edison the promotion of the incandescent light bulb would never have happened at that time. Where Edison’s patents ran into the thousands, mine are single digit, and I have designed well over 1,500 products in my career.

Tell us about Eco Lighting.

Our Team at ADG Lighting had created an Eco Division to respond to the changing energy concerns and Title 24 (California’s Building Energy Efficiency Program). We do have Eco Bulbs – but our overall approach to manufacturing has always been green. And that is just the architect in me.

Who have been some of your favorite celebrity clients?

I worked with Shawn Green (former Dodger great) on two of his homes along with a bunch of his teammates' homes. Shawn and his wife Lyndsey's home was recently featured in the *Spring Training* issue of [20/Twenty Architectural & Beyond](#) magazine.

For Todd Phillips, creator of the film "The Hangover," we had the opportunity to design our "Surf Rider" table and recreate some historic lighting for his 1930's beach home. And a

favorite person of mine is actress Daniella Kuhn (*Patch Adams, Hulk, Traffic*). She reinterpreted her old Santa Monica rent-controlled four-plex, upgraded and kept her tenants and was engaging. Without a designer Daniella was open and invited suggestions. There have been so many great opportunities to engage with celebs and Fortune 100 clients. They are always willing to share their stories and a few have even taken me under their wings to bounce business projects off of.

Tell us about working on hotels and restaurants.

I love working on hotels and restaurants. The budgets are sometimes very tight, but this is where we can publicly display our couture work and great solutions to the projects.

Deirdre Wallace who developed the (LEED EB

Silver) Ambrose Hotel was so gracious in letting me re-interpret craftsman and eco luxury hospitality. We also had a great opportunity to design and manufacture [iconic lighting for the Manhattan Country Club](#). We worked with designer Jen Wu (now with Belzberg Architects Group) to create some fascinating couture pieces. The asymmetrical gold coin chandelier that graces the main room is 8 feet tall and suspended with no center shaft from a skylight. We came with full-scale drawings and maquettes to review with the ownership so everyone knew what the end result would look like.



From the SLS in Florida to Spago's in Beverly Hills and current Disney projects overseas, there is always a challenge. Our biggest challenge at ADG Lighting was relighting Salt Lake City Hall and Main Street. We did this with our Eco Lighting Program.



Who have been some of your favorite architects, contractors and designers to work with?

Noted firms are fun to work with as well. I have had the opportunity to work with Robert Stern Architecture, Gwathmey Siegel Architects, Marc Appleton, Homer Oatman, Bob White, McCoy Construction and Michael Berman Designs. When I started my career 25 years earlier, my goal was to meet the best to become a better architect. Well, I am not practicing architecture, but I am able to practice with the greats, and this is a dream come true.



Anything you would like to add?

As our journey at ADG participating in the world of architecture continues, it would be great if we could just download ear to ear via blue tooth the following statement to our current and future clients:

“Today’s design world tends to emulate, copy and repeat from the overload of images that we see. What is always wonderful is working with a client to create designs that are responsive to the project – so we do not overload. It is like eating a great meal; just enough and you are satisfied and will remember that meal and the people you enjoyed it with.”

“We inspire and collaborate, repeat as needed and always come ready with a pen and sketchbook in hand to create real lasting functional details and lasting lighting and details for architecture. We create inspired collections thru the centuries.”©

[Eleanor Schrader](#) is an award winning architectural and interior design historian, professor and consultant who lectures worldwide on the history of architecture, interiors, furniture, and decorative arts. Follow her on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).