

LIGHTING

DIMENSIONS

lasting effects

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Like any business, the club industry moves along; from its own dizzying and exciting heights to slow, lethargic lows. Currently the denizens of clubland are noticing an upswing in activity and a lot of visual changes. Spending nearly all of a club's lighting budget on dance floor effects is no longer the norm for most the clubs, but more designer collaboration, more choices in fixtures, and more ambient lighting choices are gaining ground. In an industry as unpredictable as this, clear-cut trends are sometimes difficult to spot. Luckily several club lighting designers were willing to shed some light on the subject by sharing their observations about the past, present, and future of club lighting.

SHOW THEM THE MONEY

Steve Lieberman of Los Angeles-based SJ Lighting has been designing club lighting for over 10 years. Most recently he worked on several big nightclubs, including the new Crobar in New York City, the renovation of Crobar in Chicago, and Ice in Las Vegas.

“There was a lull in club installations for a while, but now that it's picking back up, everyone is looking to outdo everyone else,” Lieberman says. “Within the past year or two there has certainly been a surge of owners looking to compete with other clubs as far as the technology goes. Since the lighting community is definitely moving forward at a very rapid pace, it's easy to see how a club that's been open for 10 years could have been left behind long ago in terms of design.”

And makeovers cost money. “A lot of the established clubs are now actually digging into their pockets, hiring new designers, and purchasing new equipment,” Lieberman says. “So that comes with design and how much money they're spending. For Crobar in New York, we didn't really use any cutting-edge equipment. It's sort of the same old equipment with a new approach. We put in high-speed chain motors, some LED effects, moving head lights, and a Martin GrandMA console, but we tried to put a new flip onto everything.”

The big difference was the number of designers working on the club. “It was a major collaborative effort, which is unusual,” Lieberman says. “Paul Gregory of Focus Lighting did the architectural lighting design and Doug Brandt from Artfag handled the video design. You do need to collaborate with other designers in order to come up with cutting edge concepts at times — depending on the space — and we were all very respectful of each other, so it worked out great.”

EDUCATING CLUB OWNERS

Justin Jenkins of Austin-based Creative Production & Design, has recently worked on lighting designs for Hush and Sky in Austin.

“People are spending some serious money, which is good,” he says. “Club owners are starting to listen to us and investing in more reliable equipment — even in this economy. I've been kind of shocked in a good way. Instead of buying inexpensive gear that breaks down within two to six months, they're spending the extra money up front and getting the better products that are on the market.”

Some of those products include the growing range of LED units. “People are becoming more aware of its nice applications for installations, plus the longevity of LEDs is pretty significant,” he explains. “For Sky we have a 6.8' tall by 10' wide panel of Versa™ TILE from Element Labs. It's like a big picture frame and it's installed directly behind the DJ booth. When I saw it I knew it was exactly what we wanted. Everyone's jaw just drops when they see it.

“When the prices come down on visualization software like Eureka from Martin or the Catalyst from High End, that will be the next big trend for club design,” Jenkins continues. “I could even see for a new position, like a VJ, being created within the club environment for controlling a system like that. The possibilities are huge.”

THAT'S “ARCHITAINMENT”

Dave Chesal, entertainment and leisure segment manager at Martin Professional, and a lighting designer in his own right (Senses in Memphis, Hush in Austin, Rio in Gainesville, GA) contends that total club lighting is the industry's most significant development.

“Whether it be LED, fiber optics, conventional or automated lighting — it doesn't really matter what the product is, the true trend is taking a lighting product that is used in an architectural fashion and incorporating into entertainment lighting,” he says. “Thus we come up with ‘architainment lighting.’” This trend starts with the exterior of the building, goes right through the lobby, in and around all the ancillary areas, right onto the dance floor. So it takes the whole property and makes it part of the party.”

This approach gives a cohesive bond throughout the club and allows the board operator, the club manager, or owner to theme the entire experience. “In order to that you need a systems integration,” Chesal explains. “The key to making it work well is putting together a good control system, not just a controller, so an operator, owner, or manager can run it well.”

A SNOG IN THE CORNER

Luke Dodd, a club lighting designer and project manager at the UK-based I-Vision, has also noticed something of an architainment type lighting trend in the UK. “There's certainly a lot more wall washing going on,” he says. “A general design trend is that tables, chairs, flooring, walls, and ceilings are becoming much softer and lighting is being used to emphasize that fact.

“Over the past three to five years in the UK, the trend seems to be moving away from the warehouse-style discotheques,” Dodd continues. “As the prices in technology have gone down and different fittings have come into place, people have been able to spend more on getting the design right in terms of the comfort and aesthetics for the actual venue. Clubs are looking to create more of a relaxing atmosphere, certainly within specific areas of a venue. There has definitely been a move away from dark corners with flashing strobe lighting and old style scanner and moving head type technology into perhaps more mood creating technology, such as LEDs,” Dodd says. “You can color change LEDs very simply and run them on the same sort of control system as you would a normal moving head or scanner or strobe light system, so that's interesting as well.”

The super clubs like Cream, God's Kitchen, and Ministry of Sound that gained their popularity in the late 80s and early 90s are struggling now. “There has been a move away from the super club,” Dodd says. “It was all about packing in as many people as you possibly could into a huge warehouse type of venue. It was more of a rave scene than a nightclub. But a lot of those clubs have now had to close down or rationalize their operations to cater to a more demanding clientele that aren't looking for sweaty people in corners who are drunk out of their faces and falling everywhere — though that was why most people used to go to nightclubs. Now when people go out to spend their precious earned pennies they are now looking to get a more relaxed environment from it.”

Apparently the excitement of queuing up outside a massive club when they could be having fun somewhere else has waned among today's more sophisticated party crowd; this has created a new type of nightlife marketing. “It's all this shift to more ambient, relaxing, and soft mood lighting,” Dodd concludes. “However, there is still a great element here in the UK of the 80s style disco — and I think there always will be, because people who go to clubs are always going to want to get a snog in a corner.”

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