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RISEN AGAIN

JILL ENTWISTLE TALKS TO PRESIDENT OF THE IALD GRAHAM PHOENIX, A MAN WHO HAS HAD HIS FAIR SHARE OF TURMOIL OVER THE YEARS BUT WHO IS NOW AT PEACE WITH HIMSELF...

Graham Phoenix has lived up to his name on more than one occasion. The demise of Lighting Design Partnership in 2000, was followed by the demise last year of Lightmatters, the company that arose from LDP's ashes with himself and Graham Large at the helm.

His reincarnation this time is a little more thorough, having completely changed both his personal and professional life in 2006, setting up as a solo practice and embarking on something of a mystical quest of self-discovery.

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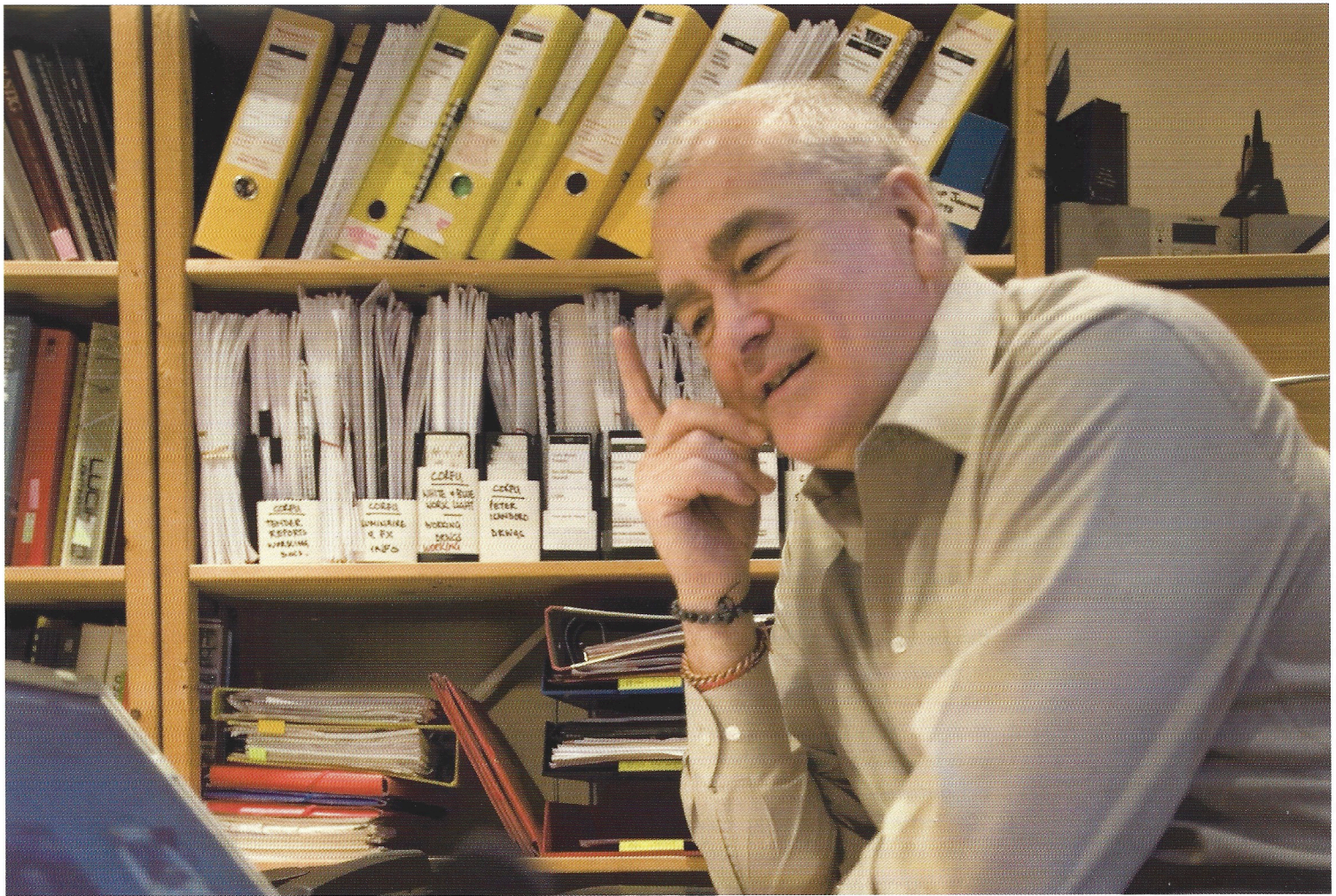
Professionally, he is a pared-down version of his former self – he has even shaved off his trademark beard – keen to strip away all the superfluous stuff that has taken him away from the business of actual lighting design over the years. "It happens to everyone, you become good at something and you move away from it. You end being a manager, an owner, an organiser."

Clients have apparently responded well to the streamlined version. There was the one job, Rippon Abbey, that he didn't get because the client felt he had insufficient back-up, but the vast majority have responded positively, he says. "I've been clear with clients that I'm working on my own and don't have people to do lots of drawings. The interesting thing is that the majority of clients have said that that is exactly what they want. They want detail but what they don't need is fully produced CAD documentation. What clients want from the lighting designer is something different in terms of ideas. You can put those ideas in place without spending a lot of time sitting at the computer terminal."

Phoenix believes that too many lighting design practices get bogged down in the business of endlessly producing and amending drawings, once the sole province of the architect or engineer, the two stools between which the lighting designer generally falls.

"I think there's some point where lighting design has gone in a strange direction, probably to prove itself as a serious profession," he says. "It's not cost-effective. You end up having more design staff than you actually need. You get swamped by the sheer time taken to do all this work. I've seen days of time disappear not really doing lighting design."

Now that he has boiled it down to its essence, as it were, how would Phoenix characterise his creative approach? "I would say I have a theatrical approach, but not in an entertainment lighting sense, not in the sense of colour or dynamic light. It's theatrical in a very subtle way. In the main I use white light and very focused luminaires – I like fittings with very controlled optics – lighting specific areas, getting a lot of texture. It's a lot about the lighting of surfaces."



His creative bedrock is stage lighting where he spent 15 years before moving across to the architectural side in the early 1980's. "In theatre you learn to think in three dimensions. Although you look at the stage from one side you learn to think about lighting coming from different directions. You learn a lot about things like sidelighting, backlighting and edgelighting. It's about bringing out the structure and form of what you see."

The award-winning Albert Memorial, his favourite project along with the award-winning Durham Cathedral, epitomises his approach, he says: "The thing about it that is peculiarly mine is how detailed it is – there's a lot of narrow-beam spotting with marine searchlights – how much equipment is used and how expensive it was."

Phoenix is current president of the International Association of Lighting Designers, a role about which he considers was a contributory factor in the demise of Lightmatters. He has admitted to "taking his eye off the ball" in a year which saw the company torpedoed by two unpaid Greek contracts.

The presidential mantle hasn't particularly cramped his style when it comes to outspokenness. He admits that the IALD's reputation for parochialism is somewhat justified. "It is parochial. As president living in the UK so much of what I get involved in doing has nothing to do with my professional life here. But there are two aspects to it – one is trying to grow it in other parts of the world, the other is helping the association as it exists – to some extent that has to be parochial because 70 per cent of the members are US based."

What he gets particularly exercised about is that the majority of lighting designers in this country don't bother to get involved with either the IALD or ELDA which, despite the occasionally troubled relationship, he views as a complementary and positive force.

"One of the things that does upset me is how few lighting designers con-

Any projects he would like to change?

"It's not arrogance, but none springs to mind. There are projects I'd like to see brought back to what they were, such as Albert Memorial. I've just been reappointed to redo Durham after around 15 years. The architect said everyone still loves the lighting and the brief is not to change the basic scheme, but it's old and tired and things have moved on in the cathedral. It was fantastic to look at what I'd done and still be happy with the whole thing."

Project he dislikes

"I'd like to get my hands on the exterior of St Paul's. It talks about moonlighting, but it's the brightest moonlight I've ever seen. The idea's right but the execution is wrong."

Project he admires

The Bridge of Aspiration, linking the Royal Opera House with the Royal Ballet across Floral Street, by Speirs and Major.

"It's absolutely startling in its simplicity and in a sense it shows the stamp of the lighting designer because of its extraordinary integration, though the solution is one that anyone could come up with. That was a sign of lighting design becoming mature. Absolutely beautiful."

Lighting hero

"David Hersey for his theatrical lighting – the nature of it still informs the architectural lighting I do. He worked very hard at doing something different with theatrical lighting, making it an architectural element on stage. He put an incredible focus on backlighting, light curtains and walls of light. He was daring enough to be different and earned a great deal of money in the process. People should be willing to put their head above the parapet and do something different."



tribute to the profession. It's one of the things that holds the profession back. I don't know what to do about it because it's the same in other organisations – it's just that other professions like architecture have more practitioners generally."

He also believes that lighting practices have to play a bigger role in the training process if the profession is to develop. "There is a shortage of lighting designers, but it's of experienced people, not people coming out of schools. The crushing need is not to develop new courses but people with experience. It's the time you spend in a practice which is more important than the year you spent at Bartlett's. Lighting design practices have to be prepared to take on more inexperienced people. Who's going to train them otherwise?"

Although highly positive about his own future, the time he has spent in the States (in addition to his global travels as president) has left him less than sanguine about the future of lighting design as a profession.

"Lighting design is in a very dangerous position. The IALD has recognised this mainly because of the experience in the US. It's in danger of disappearing. The relentless march of energy legislation is making the practice of lighting design more and more difficult. The legislation in places like California and New York is now such that there is increasingly less scope for people to have any ideas or do anything other than put compact fluorescent downlights around the place. There's less ability to be imaginative because there's less to work with. That's not going to stop – that's only going to get worse." ☹

Notable projects

Urban strategies: Co-writer of the UK's first modern urban lighting strategy, Edinburgh Lighting Vision (1989-90). Phoenix has been involved with around a third of all strategies carried out in the UK, including Chester, Leeds, Scarborough, St Andrews, Belfast, the old city of Cork and Londonderry. He recently completed the strategy for York as a part of the Urban Lighting Group Consortium and the River of Light strategy for Liverpool and Merseyside in partnership with Mouchel Parkman.

Cathedrals: Durham; Ely; Christchurch in Dublin; the interior of Hexham Abbey, and St John's, Limerick. He has recently completed Southwell Minster, near Nottingham; Peterborough; Carlisle, and Hereford Cathedral Lady Chapel.

Theatres: Sadler's Wells and Prince of Wales Theatre, two of the eight theatres in London's West End for which he will ultimately be responsible.

Plus: Trafalgar Square; Albert Memorial; Somerset House exterior; Star City, Birmingham; Dulwich Picture Gallery.

Current projects

- New studio theatre at LAMDA (London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art).
- Update of his previous scheme for Durham Cathedral.

- One million euro lighting scheme for cable car over the Liffy in Dublin (subject to planning permission):

"It's a fantastic project, a cable car right through the centre of Dublin, 90m high above the Liffy. It has these cantilevered towers sitting across the river and basically the job is to light those – I want to light them so they look structurally impossible and seem to fall into the river."

- New theatre in Aylesbury by Arts Team: "A big theatre mainly for rock concerts – a beautiful design."
- Ongoing work in London for Cameron Macintocsh. About to start the Gielgud Theatre and at some point the Queens Theatre.
 - A new theatre and leisure centre in Greece.
- Small bridge in Strabán in Northern Ireland, plus a couple of other bridge projects.