



by Nathalie Rozot

A quarter-century after the passing of James Nuckolls, perhaps the best way to honor his legacy is by asking some tough questions about the future direction of lighting education

I never knew James Nuckolls, who died of AIDS in 1987 at age 49. Yet if it weren't for him, I would not be teaching lighting design today nor writing this column. JoAnne Lindsley had been a student of his, which led her to pursue a career in lighting design and education. She later became the director of the graduate program that he had founded at Parsons, and she invited me to teach in 2000. This initiated both my service at Parsons and other programs and my interest in lighting education.

Nuckolls is a bit of an unsung hero to my and younger generations; his role in lighting education is seldom referenced and not well known. Since 2012 marks the 25th anniversary of his untimely death, I decided to research his accomplishments and legacy, and how these can inform our future academic programs. I have only just begun interviewing his former colleagues and students, and scanning archival sources, but I will share here my preliminary thoughts and findings.

The grave black-and-white portraits I had seen failed to portray the tall person and colorful personality that came alive through the personal stories of those who knew Jim, as they all referred to him: "He was quite a character." Jim was a passionate visionary on a mission—he aspired for lighting design to be known, recognized and organized as a design profession. He was bright—his thorough knowledge of the science and the art of light shone throughout his serial educational endeavors. He was a man of words

and action—his sparkling lectures popularized lighting design, and his eloquent teachings populated this young practice with many converts. He was a prolific writer—he developed the seminal textbook *Interior Lighting for Environmental Designers* and authored many articles on lighting in design publications. He was also a techie—an early adopter of the computing technologies he had long envisioned before most even began to understand their efficacy. He supported the IES, founded the IALD with fellow luminaries and pioneered a graduate program in lighting design at Parsons.

As I began skimming three decades



An unsung hero.

of course catalogs to survey lighting courses and curricula in the Parsons archives, Jim's achievements were taking shape before my eyes. He brought lighting from continuing education to the Parsons Environmental Design undergraduate program in 1970, rapidly expanded one course into

four, and in 1984, broke new ground with a lighting master's in an undergraduate design program. Parsons offered a graduate degree in lighting design five years before it did in architecture, and 25 years before it did in interior design.

Merit alone does not suffice to bring change in academia. Jim had the talent, charisma and intelligence to advance education in lighting, but he was also at the right place at the right time. The place and time were New York City in the '70s and '80s, where and when Parsons School of Design, which was merging with the New School, offered an innova-

tive Environmental Design undergraduate program that contrasted with conventional disciplinary divisions such as interior design and architecture. I have yet to document the historic process through which Jim added a Master's in lighting design to the mix, but somehow, murky politics, curricular blurs and radical academics did magic—for him, and for us.

HAS PROGRESS STALLED?

Today, education in lighting design owes much to Jim, from the seminal graduate program he founded, to all the educators he motivated and to the ongoing initiatives that the Nuckolls Fund for Lighting Education supports to continue his work. Yet, I trust many would agree with me that teaching lighting design too often feels like fighting for lighting education in the academic trenches. And while we may think we know what is to blame, I started wondering, as I began this project, if we had not been resting too much on Jim's laurels: How much progress have we truly made in our thinking about education since the '80s? The curricular content and structure that are in use at Parsons and in debate at PLDA, today, strikingly resemble the Masters' program that Jim outlined nearly 30 years ago. However, our profession has flourished and our industry has undergone dramatic changes: Could this mean that we have not been and are still not looking at the problem the right way, or at the right problem? Have we prolonged a status quo, instead of renewing educational models and developing more and more novel programs in lighting?

Lighting has grown, and the growth of any discipline leads to specialization: Do we

master our complexity, and do our Master's teach it adequately? Are we in control of how our educational practices evolved, or did we let lighting be accessorized by other fields of practice and education?

Lighting design is an integrated practice that is inherently multi-faceted and transcalar, yet at its core, it is a comprehensive

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discipline centered on the expertise of light. The prevailing divide between art and science in design and engineering education—and culture at large—has not served well our field which cries for consilience: lighting is art and it is science, and it is transdisciplinary within both areas. Maybe it is misfit for traditional education structures. Maybe our students, who will be practicing (and teaching) for the next 50 years, need optimal alternatives to academic models that were established in a past cultural-historical context. Maybe we ought to face our identity crisis more radically, embrace our difference and our differences, and dare imagine alternatives that continue to broaden the scope of lighting design as a profession and as an academic discipline.

Maybe majors in Light (alongside Acoustics and Materiality) across design disciplines? Bachelors and Master's degrees in Art and Science? Undergraduate and graduate interior, architectural, landscape and urban design curricula for lighting design

students, instead of "plus-lighting" syllabi for interior, architectural, landscape and urban design students? Dual degrees for lighting designers to design architecture? Three-or-more-years masters in lighting?

In the 21st century, honoring Jim's legacy may mean asking and attending to modern questions that can advance light-

ing education. We should be aspiring for the brightest future: lighting design is an exceptional field, and exceptional tasks require exceptional measures.

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Nathalie Rozot is a lighting practitioner and a part-time assistant professor at Parsons the New School for Design's School of Constructed Environments in the Master of Fine Arts in Lighting Design program. She is the founder of the lighting think tank Phoscope.