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Until June Paul Nulty was director of Light Bureau, where he'd worked since 2000. He left to start up his own lighting design consultancy, Paul Nulty Lighting Design, paulnulty.co.uk. Past work includes offices for KPMG (far right, top). Recent work for the Kurt Geiger store, Portobello Road, west London has become a nationwide rollout

PAUL NULTY

As the former director at Light Bureau, Paul Nulty has struck out on his own with the intention of getting lighting design higher on the agenda of projects and reducing the negative environmental impact of lighting. He talks to **Jamie Mitchell** about his accidental love affair with lighting

With talk of another financial crisis looming, it may not seem like the best time to start a business, but the small matter of a recession wasn't going to stop lighting designer Paul Nulty from striking out on his own.

So why now? 'Well, if you can make it in a recession then there's every chance you'll make a go of it when things improve,' says Nulty, who left his job as director at Light Bureau in June to set up his own practice, Paul Nulty Lighting Design.

Six months on, things are looking good. A project for the Kurt Geiger shoe store in London's Notting Hill has led to a nationwide roll-out, and he's also working on a restaurant for Marco Pierre White and a store for the clothing brand Penguin.

Like many of his contemporaries, Nulty didn't plan a career in lighting design. 'I found lighting sort of by accident,' he says. While studying theatre and performance design at Paul McCartney's Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts he became fascinated with the propensity of light to change the look and feel of a space.

He wrote his thesis on the use of theatrical techniques in architectural lighting and had a six-month placement at a lighting design consultancy. 'I never intended to get into it as a career but it was something that really fascinated me,' he says. After graduating, he found work as a junior design assistant with the now defunct Lighting Design Partnership where, he says, 'I fell in love with my job'.

He joined Light Bureau as a junior designer in 2000 when there were three staff, and during the next 11 years helped build the practice up to being one of the UK's most successful lighting design consultancies.

In that time he's seen huge changes in the lighting industry. 'When I joined Light Bureau we had to fight to get involved on almost every project,' he says. 'Most projects were developer-led and unless you could persuade the client that there was value for them on the bottom line, it was difficult to convince them that it was worth getting a lighting designer involved rather than just using an engineer.'

But Nulty adds that lighting designers have become a much more highly valued member of the design team on almost all projects. Where lighting design used to be left to architects or interior designers, developments in technology mean it has become a far more specialist area of design. 'People realise now that good lighting design can really add value to a space,' he says.

While he's committed to reducing the negative environmental impact of lighting,

Nulty says he's 'still on the fence' when it comes to LEDs: 'As a light source it's going to play a huge role in the future of lighting design, there's no doubt about that, but I don't think LEDs are the panacea many people seem to think. LEDs are fantastic if used correctly, but they aren't the most energy efficient light source on the market, and they can be difficult to maintain.' He also says that many of the claims made by manufacturers of LEDs are yet to be proven correct.

So what does he intend to do differently with his own practice? 'I'd like to get involved with projects earlier in the design process,' he says. 'Part of my philosophy is about integrating lighting into the architecture of a building.'

It's an approach he was already pioneering at Light Bureau and one which worked particularly well on one of his largest and most successful projects, the lighting scheme for the headquarters of accountancy firm KPMG at Canary Wharf, which won in the workplace lighting category at this year's Lighting Design Awards.

'KPMG was a fantastic client,' he says. 'When you work with a client that gets excited about a project that excitement permeates the design team and you end up working in perfect harmony. KPMG got what it deserved, which was an award-winning building.'

Another key objective for Nulty's own practice is to curtail the harmful effects of lighting design on the environment. Like many designers, he has been impressed by the Cradle to Cradle scheme developed by architect William McDonough and chemist Michael Braungart, which advocates a waste free approach to design, although he admits that this is a particularly difficult approach to apply to lighting design.

'For me, it's not just about looking at the watts per square metre; it's also about looking at embodied energy, where luminaries are sourced from and what they are made of – how much plastic is in there, for example.'

He's keen to see more research into the effects of light. 'There's so much we don't know about the way light effects us, both physically and psychologically,' he says.

In the meantime, he's busy establishing Paul Nulty Lighting Design and hopes that one day it will become as successful as the other lighting design practices he admires, such as Speirs + Major and, of course, Light Bureau.

'It's one of the scariest and most exciting things I've ever done,' he says. 'I'm probably working harder than I've ever worked in my life, but it's really exciting.' ■

