

NATHALIE ROZOT, LIGHTING DESIGNER, NEW YORK, UNITED STATES

# On being a phototect

By Ludmila Svystunova

**The photoplanner, professor at Parsons The New School for Design and founder of the lighting-design think tank PhoScope, talked to Luminous about her views on the key debates in lighting design culture, education and research, as well as about PhosWords – a collection of light-related neologisms aimed at increasing awareness of current lighting issues.**



Nathalie Rozot

## **How did you become a lighting designer?**

Nathalie Rozot: I was trained in interior design, but it's the only discipline which I never practised. I worked in architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning and exhibition design, and by chance landed in a lighting-design company around 2000. I was invited to teach at Parsons' graduate programme in lighting design shortly after that, and I spent a summer studying the physics of light and the physiology of vision to learn as much as possible about lighting. I became really interested in the complexity of light and fascinated by the concept that in lighting nothing is absolute and everything is relative. I found my true calling once I realised this was a field where you design, as I like to say, in at least five dimensions.

## **What did you teach at Parsons?**

At first I taught graphics and drawing techniques for lighting design, but very quickly I was asked to teach Studio, and now I'm the lead in the thesis faculty.

## **For you, what are the key issues when discussing light?**

I think that currently two key issues in lighting design are ergonomics and energy. Ergonomics is a word I prefer to health, because I find that it is more inclusive of design. At times these two issues conflict, and it's an interesting challenge. We should aspire to build the right and the just light.

## **What are the critical aspects of this discussion?**

Recently, I have also been thinking that

## Definitions from PhosWords:

### disphotocize

v. to remove light from (Brit. **disphotocise**) -ing -ed.

[f. L. dis- 'apart' + Gk. phōs-, phōt- 'light']

### phosform

v. to shape with light -ed -ing.

syn. **photomorph**

[f. Gk. phōs-, phōt- 'light' + L. fōrma 'form']

we need to radically disrupt the design culture at large. As a colleague of mine put it, there is a “daytime bias,” and we need a fundamental cultural shift in design. One way is for lighting designers to become more fluent in general design issues. We should raise our aspirations. Lighting designers should aspire to be the lead designers on large pluri-disciplinary projects, because for some projects a photocentric approach is relevant, especially today.

#### **Who do you think are the key stakeholders that need to be affected to change this culture?**

Education. We are experiencing a major change in the demographics of lighting-design practitioners. Many of my peers are latecomers to the field of light, with a background in liberal arts such as design

or fine arts, or a technical one, or both, or come from other fields, but the new generation of practitioners was trained as lighting designers. We are creating a subculture of lighting-design specialists, and I think we need to broaden the lighting education curriculum and include a larger design and research skillset.

#### **Moving on now to your think tank, PhoScope. How was it born?**

I have always interconnected practice and theory in my work, so it is probably where and when the concept of PhoScope started. From the start, I found the field of lighting design a curse because of the absence of critical discourse. Yet it was also a blessing because it was so rich with many opportunities for both practice and study. I decided around 2006 to reconnect

my practice and my research interests. At the same time, I began teaching more but found no institutional support for my critical study. In lighting design, we lack funding programmes and mechanisms to support speculative work and critical research - architects have more of a chance to be funded for research on lighting topics than do lighting designers. This motivated me to take a stand, and when some former colleagues and students also expressed an interest in working with me, PhoScope came into being.

#### **What are its main activities?**

PhoScope has three main areas of activity. PhoShaping encompasses experimental, speculative design projects. PhosForum aims to launch public programmes that go beyond the project-based presentations we

## photandrous

adj. pertaining to light with masculine qualities.

## photandrously

adv. **photandrousness** n. ant. photogynous.

[f. Gk. phōs-, phōt- 'light' + Gk. andros 'man']

## photogynous

adj. of light that has feminine qualities.

**photogynously** adv. **photogynousness** n. ant.

photandrous.

[f. Gk. phōs-, phōt- 'light' + Gk. gunē 'woman']

are accustomed to in our field, and to expand our culture with more critical conversations. We are currently exploring a collaboration with another organization, Green Light New York. PhotoTexts are writings on the theoretical issues that are developed or discussed in the other two activities. Some drafts are in the works, and a few critical texts are available on the PhoScope website.

Ultimately, I'm aspiring to counter the intellectual paucity we contend with in our field. I am very concerned by the global professionalisation of academia. More and more professionals are teaching as adjuncts, and this happens at the expense of scholarship and theory that we desperately need to develop in lighting.

I envision that PhoScope can serve as a critical node in a wider network of professional and academic practices and connect the audience to critical issues.

### **Can you give some examples of the critical research projects in which you have engaged?**

One PhoShaping project was based on my proposition to approach Times Square as a paradox: it's an energy-hungry environment that everybody loves to hate and hates to love, so how could it make sense? I proposed that the billboards formed an exterior space, and explored models where we could integrate exterior lighting and renewable energy in sustainable urban ecosystems.

I am especially interested in this notion of urban lighting as part of urban ecosystems. I see it as a broad area with many subtopics, but to build a theoretical foundation requires finding or inventing models to explore our nocturnal environments. I have found inspiration in architectural theory and from authors who studied popular culture and forces that drive the built environment, but lighting is not urban design and it's not architectural design: we need our own models.

### **How was PhosWords developed?**

PhoScope was born at the same time as the idea of PhosWords. In Greek, Phos or Photo means light, and scope – target. I realized that phot was an existing word, meaning a unit of light, and so was

## photopolis

n. a city with or of light and or lighting. pl.

photopolises.

syn. *metrophotopolis* *megaphotopolis*

[f. Gk. *phōs-*, *phōt-* 'light' + Gk. *pólis* 'city']

## phototecture

n. the discipline of architectural lighting design.

phototect n. *phototectural* adj. *phototecturally* adv.

[f. Gk. *phōs-*, *phōt-* 'light' + Gk. *tektōn* 'builder']

photology, which meant the science of light, but almost nobody knew those and almost everybody associated photo with photography. There was no reason why we could not claim this Greek root or stress that it is about light. The idea of a whole new vocabulary then became a manifesto in the form of an etymological game, one word led to another, and the first edition comprised more than 400 words.

I was fortunate to receive a residency at the MacDowell Artist Colony for three consecutive years where I did most of this work. Getting these residencies was not only encouraging, but also provided a supportive environment and allowed for great continuity in my thinking about PhoScope and the PhosWords project.

I regularly create more words and there is a second edition coming with over 500 words. Next year, for the International Year of Light, we will launch a competition for new words to engage the lighting community in this project. I would also really like the words to be translated into French and Spanish.

### What are some of your favourite PhosWords and why?

*Phototect* – I find very effective; when someone says, I'm an architect, and I respond, I'm a phototect, it makes a statement.

*Photopolis* – because everybody knows what it means!

*Photandrous and photogynous* – light with masculine or feminine qualities, respectively.

*Disphotocize* – a word for the Dark Sky Association...

*Phosform* – that's what we do in lighting design.

PhosWords makes for a playful jargon, but for me this endeavor is also more profound. These words could empower us in voicing and upping our role in the constructed environment.

### Website

[www.nrozot.com](http://www.nrozot.com)

[www.phoscope.org](http://www.phoscope.org)