



by Nathalie Rozot

**A think tank approach could be a model for what's possible in the realm of research and critical study in the field of lighting**

**PhoScape:** *Noun*, Photo: Light + *Skopós*:

**Aim, purpose, target**

I am a photoplanner: I plan and design with light. Since you are reading this column, you may or may not be a phototect, a diaphototect (a phototect who specializes in daylight), a photoscaper or a photoplanner, but you are most likely a photosopher (someone who is wise about light), and your practice probably relates to the photopolis. You may soon become photoglot.

When I founded the think tank PhoScope in 2011, I used the Greek etymology of light to create a series of neologisms that served as a manifesto for this endeavor. The lexicon (a.k.a. PhosWords) now comprises more than 200 entries, soon to be complete with definitions, etymological roots, synonyms and antonyms. In time it will become an open-source resource and evolve as a living language. The playfulness of the jargon, however, does not cancel out its meaningfulness: I posit that bringing forth a new language of light can facilitate the expression and communication of our photocentric community's words and actions, and serve to consolidate new reflective research in lighting design.

Design is a way of thinking: designers (re)frame problems, uncover patterns and create solutions intended to improve people's experiences. Design questions also spawn research questions. Scholarly and practical research in design are connected, and advance knowledge together. Paola Antonelli, senior curator of design and architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, related in *Seed* magazine that "design is an agent of change that enables us to

understand complex changes and problems, and to turn them into something useful. . . . Tackling today's global challenges will require radical thinking, creative solutions and collaborative action."

## DEEPER DIVE

As a design practitioner and academic, I have long advocated for new research that can help us understand the cultural and historical constructs of light, and update lighting propositions for the modern context. Today, issues of light and lighting have been co-opted by energy requirements, architectural practices and marketing strategies, and reduced to performance, technology, luminaires or art installations. Meanwhile scholars and academics are often architecture-centric and seldom address the role of light in the performance, presentation and perception of the built environment. In addition, the media coverage of lighting is typically inadequate and lacks sophistication, and as a result the general public's perception is often reduced to notions of low-energy light bulbs and light pollution.

PhoScope establishes a new platform that addresses these limitations in an effort to bolster the practice, education and critical study of lighting. Its advisory board is composed of international thinkers within the design, academic and scientific communities, who are well positioned to forge critical alliances between lighting design and other fields of research and practice.

The think tank pursues these goals through a three-fold programmatic structure: project-based design research, public programs and publications. Project-based design research includes, for instance, an experimental project with daylight and

## EDUCATION

low-wattage solar-powered sources for a dance performance.

Public events mix panelists whose disciplines intersect with lighting issues such as design and engineering, social sciences, health sciences and economics in thematic debates. As an example, a critical analysis of the inherent complexities of the dark

skies movement can be framed within the social, cultural, economic and demographic dynamics of today's geophotal context.

Publications expand on the issues that PhoScope explores in its design research projects and exposes in its public events. These include critical essays, which offer analytical and theoretical explorations of

the complex and dynamic lighting systems comprised in the practices and experiences of the built environment. In addition, the think tank offers critical reviews of select films, publications or schemes.

### A HOLISTIC SCOPE

PhoScope's value proposition is to contribute design research and critical study to the field of lighting. It also challenges the lighting trade at large to recognize the need to develop and sustain a stronger critical culture with new design research, scholarly study and critical work. The organization is a nonprofit and counts on support from individual, corporate and institutional sponsorship and contributions for funding. The larger issue, beyond this one think tank, is that lighting research needs more than silver lining: we urgently need a collective commitment to develop a framework of industry-wide funding institutions and programs to not only support pure and applied research, but also design research and critical study. We require new collaborative mechanisms between design academics, students, professionals and industries. Our community must elaborate research agendas and scale-up diverse research efforts. As it generates cumulative benefits for practice and education, research will make lighting a stronger academic and professional discipline: the return on investment will be priceless.

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