

Notes from conversation with Iain Johnson, Rigby & Rigby and Rebecca Weir, Light.iQ September 2021

Introductions

Iain Johnson, founder and co-ceo of award-winning Rigby & Rigby which is part of the Allect International Design Group and Rebecca Weir, celebrated Creative Director at Light.iQ, explain their approach to collaboration - and how research-led, client-focused design- and a passion for detail - has fuelled their work together over 15 years and helped them to achieve:

- 68% client retention
- cut out the time, cost and client inconvenience of revisits and reprogramming
- consistently deliver record-breaking prices and a premium of 10% per square foot
- the first residential building to achieve WELL platinum standard in the UK

And all for an additional 2 - 2.5% of total build and project costs - a range of 10% - 25% above a 'basic' lighting provision. And, as Rebecca points out, that cost is nothing compared to the cost of getting it wrong.

In this interview, Iain and Rebecca discuss two current projects: Lancelot House in central London, which is the first residential project in the UK to achieve WELL accreditation. And a Private Family Office on the waterfront in Oslo, which poses a very different set of challenges.

Notes

Lancelot House



Lancelot House, London, image Rigby & Rigby

IJ: We're really fortunate in our sector because our clients have been exposed to enrichment from a lighting design perspective: they generally travel to extremely sophisticated restaurants, or great hotels, might have yachts and other houses worldwide.

Shifting priorities

IJ: We're finding our clients are moving to task-based lighting because they're spending more time at home. That means special attention to areas such as the kitchen for private chefs for colour rendering and for presentation, dressing and makeup spaces and task lighting within the home office environment.

Special collections



Lancelot House, London, image Rigby & Rigby

IJ: We also have some amazing opportunities to display some collectibles going into the property, one being a vehicle. So we also have gallery configuration.

The brief enabled us to design very specifically for different areas- and that produces a whole series of challenges.

That's why through partnership with specialists, lighting designers - and Rebecca is key to that project - we've been able to realise the results that we have.

Patience and fine-tuning

IJ: The team has been working on the project for four years, so it's been a very long journey - and extremely complex in central London. But we're now at the stage where we're testing lighting configuration. We're doing one-to-one mock-ups within certain areas so we can understand the impact of the specifications and what further opportunities might be there.

IJ: It's a continually evolving process which gets audited and edited until we're collectively extremely happy with the end result.

Lighting for life

One client has just come through his bachelor years and is moving into family life. He had an extremely dark palette previously in his house, and we've been able to deliver a softer much lighter environment without changing many of the base building materials, just through as a huge change within the lighting configuration.

Another client, as he's maturing, has realized that task lighting is much more important to him for reading. So we've been able to design systems that give us the ability to deliver 15% to 20% more lighting in terms of brightness or coverage. So we're future-proofing that property.

We don't work project to project. We work hopefully with a client. And that client will take us on a journey on multiple properties. We have a 68% retention rates for our clients.



Asbury Park, image Nikolas Koenig

Private Family Office in Oslo

The brief

IJ: It's well known within the office world that if you get the lighting, right productivity goes up. Then we really just had to drill down on what that meant to them specifically within this environment. The whole process becomes more enriching.



Photo by [Christoffer Engström](#) on [Unsplash](#)

It's especially important in Oslo because, in the winter, you're down to about four to five hours worth of natural light.

IJ: The family office has a series of different workspaces: we have principal task lights, relaxation lighting, operational lighting, board configurations.

Research and development

IJ: We looked at lots of studies about productivity and investing in staff and what would the retention look like if we changed the way that they were currently operating?

IJ: We couldn't have delivered to the level that we've been able to, without running a specific research module. Fatigue, daylight, views, airflow, and colour tuneable aspects. And then having these different atmospheres that then could evolve during the course of the day. That was the most in-depth research module we've run as a studio. We did that not just to learn more about the opportunity, but also to deliver more efficiency for the office and just create an environment where people wanted to stay longer.



Image [Arvid.Malde](#) on [Unsplash](#)

IJ: So there was a huge change in the operational configuration and the circulation, which we think will add a lot of value. But lighting design was extremely important for that project.

Adding value to the business - beyond the lighting

IJ: We've also used the project to help them to be purveyors of digital arts and the landscape in the city.

IJ: One of the installations that we're looking at actually links the lighting quite well. There was a vista which terminated on their office, which is actually a very dark entrance at the moment. So we've backlit that with a huge installation of Samsung wall televisions 3m wide x 6m tall. We're going to document their investments and collaborate with the local artists to provide the installation for that quarter.

IJ: That will become their cover for their financial investment report so there are layers of sophistication, which we will then archive.

Health and well-being - a new topic for your clients?



Health suite, image Rigby & Rigby

RW: This is something we've been talking about for a long time across many projects for 15 years or so now. As the technology has changed and adapted we've had more opportunity to think about increased colour rendering, colour tunable lighting and so on.

RW: I think a client has to be quite brave to be at the forefront of this technology because at some point somebody has to jump on the bandwagon: Are you the first and you go through some of those learning curves or do you wait to see how well it's been established?

RW: I can remember speaking to a few people, not so long ago, they're still saying, 'oh, it's a gimmick.' I'm like, 'I don't understand. I don't understand how it can be a gimmick its offering these incredible opportunities to us to be able to so easily change the feel of that space.'

RW: You believe so passionately about what you're doing, but there is always that slight question when you're pushing new technology. But I think from the outset, we've always tried new techniques or used products in new and innovative way.



SKP Beijing, image Light.iQ

RW: And one thing I've learned from being in the business is never to look left or right, and not to worry too much about that. Because you've just got to find your own path and believe in what you're doing.

RW: I think that's the nice thing about the lighting industry and all these new products, there's always something new something to try and test and get excited about.

But Iain's always been very brave and always had a very open mind I have to say. So we're very lucky from that point of view.

Innovation

IJ: We've specifically noticed that in the residential marketplace, we're able to really expedite new product into the projects.

IJ: In the Marine sector, it's slightly harder because they tend to move teams from project to project. And there's a smaller captive audience of clients. There's a lot smaller production run. And some of the technology tends to tip over into the next project. So when that happens, if you're dealing with a four-year build, you could be looking at technology, which is seven or eight years old.

IJ: Whereas when it's fully in our control, we're dealing with brand new technology that's proven it's maximum a year or 18 months old.

The design process - research and testing from start to finish

IJ: We try to talk to our team about being problem-solvers and just being open to the possibilities.

IJ: I'm a huge fan of one-to-one mock-ups I think it's amazing what you can do in this sophistication of render engines now and CGI, but there's really no replacement to seeing a large format scale mock-up. And then you can really understand the day and night delivery which we're just running through on a couple of our projects at the moment. It's really easy to make an informed decision then.

A passion for detail



Design detail, image Rigby & Rigby

RW: The difference of two centimeters, one way or another, is the difference between something absolutely exceptional and perfect - or whether you bother to deliver it at all. When you've got a team that really understands that from the outset is where it all really starts to make a major difference. And when you start to deliver something that you're so incredibly proud of.

IJ: The scene setting and the control setting is also really lovely exposure for our teams. So typically that's done along with finished photography. So we have the creative leads of those projects in attendance, so they get to understand and also vet, the light setting. It's actually live through the photography. A nice day for the team when that happens.

Operational considerations

IJ: The operational dimension is generally an afterthought. But we see two sides of projects - we're designing and also delivering and having to maintain our properties.

IJ: So you need to think about what happens if you actually need to change a bulb - how easily accessible is it, how often do I have to do this. And then the procurement chain. How easy are products to customize, how easy is it to get a replacement component? Where do you actually install all the drivers?

IJ: It's such a broad subject matter that specialist knowledge early on the project is really critical to a successful project.

What about revisits and reprogramming?

IJ: We also find that because of the testing and commissioning we don't often have any revisits or reprogramming. I actually think in all of the projects we've worked together on Rebecca, we have not been back for problem.

RW: As long as you're monitoring a project and you get to go to site and you always consider and check the details, there shouldn't be an awful lot of snagging at the end. There should just be the commissioning. It's when you miss some of those important steps and go back, suddenly the unexpected is before you.

The value of long-term relationships

RW: We're incredibly fortunate to have a client who cares from both the client perspective, but also about collaboration with experts. You have to have confidence in them to know that they're going to deliver, that your knowledge is up to date and that you're able to bring to these mock-ups for example, the very best example for that specific solution that you're looking to achieve.

RW: So over the last 15 years working with Iain, we've always had a lot of fun when we've got our hands dirty, doing our mock ups, playing with lights. It's only then that you can really see and really understand what you're trying to achieve.

What about costs - and value?

IJ: I'm a firm believer that great design doesn't have to cost additional money. You just need the knowledge there from day one. It may sound expensive because there are lots of exotic items and lots of aspects which may be unknown. But it doesn't have to be expensive.

IJ: On our projects, we expect to see a line item now against specialist lighting. So not to cover feature lighting, but maybe 2 - 2.5% of total build and project costs on top of a basic scheme to enrich the lighting through the design and the product.

RW: The cost is nothing compared to getting it wrong. The alternative fundamentally is to have something that's either very average or you take that sort of brave next step and that very small investment because actually the line item for lighting compared to other costs it is very small indeed.



St Pancras Lobby, image Light.iQ

RW: And to go to the other extreme, if we are doing other lifestyle projects, for example, such as the hotel the costs for the lighting can be 20 to 25% of the build cost. Now obviously that's going to be very specific because it's going to be a restaurant or a hotel it becomes a major feature of that ambiance.

And even if you're looking at super prime property, it's a very small sum of money.



Interior, image Rigby & Rigby

IJ: Beyond the kind of gallery proposition of cars, art, whiskey, sculpture, if we're investing in materiality for feature walls or very unique finishes for furniture, if that's not represented well through the lighting, then you're missing another opportunity.

Commanding premium prices

IJ: As a business we know that when we have deployed lighting design, which is approximately 98% of our projects, we've consistently achieved record breaking price per square foot. And we think our brand and that intrinsic knowledge delivers some of that 10% return on price per square foot.

IJ: There's definitely a proportion related to lighting design - and the quality of thought and creativity that somebody like Rebecca brings to the party. So that's an argument for having her or her team on board early on.

Additional benefits of working with a lighting designer

IJ: It's a huge educational curve for our architects and interior designers and they enjoy the process. So there's actually a CPD aspect.

IJ: And then through testing and delivery, there's also a research and development aspect. So you could actually utilise some of those R&D tax credits. The costs are actually falling from a practice perspective. And the team are getting more experience, more exposure and hopefully you'll get a better outcome for your ultimate client.

Explaining value to clients

IJ: With this knowledge and research and knowledge base from all of our very highly skilled consultants, people generally understand the value of what you're trying to do for them. They appreciate the consistent investment of time and review that we go through.

IJ: We're not the easiest of teams to work with because we continually try to improve during the process to get the best product for our clients. So we don't ever look to a fixed and frozen position because some of our projects can be four five years in the making. We're continually reviewing what the best opportunity is, and try to implement that right up to the final position.

IJ: It's much easier for us because we're reasonably unique in the UK with own construction and delivery business. But I think that kind of level of client care and client experience, they know that we're continually testing and all we're trying to do is make the product better for them.

RW: In so many architectural teams, that conversation is so limited in terms of the time. It's just extraordinary to work with someone who actually truly values and offers that level of depth, because I think everybody learns from the process.

Why doesn't everyone use a lighting designer?

IJ: I think broadly beyond that it's an unpublicized profession and that's a bit of a shame, because it does bring lots of value to our schemes.

IJ: A lot of people can deliver good and not many people can deliver outstanding or excellent. And the only way that we're able to do that is by working in close collaboration with other specialist teams because it's a huge component of the success of a project.



Rotunda, image Peter Kociha

IJ: Lighting is really intrinsic to the beauty of a final piece of architecture. I think it's fair to say that it's not new, but the industry's evolving extremely quickly and unless you have somebody that lives and breathes and operates in that space full-time you're definitely missing out on an opportunity.

IJ: Everybody perceives lighting design to be a contract-delivered proposition.

There's a huge expectation on architects and designers to the perception, certainly from a professional team that they should be able to deliver lighting design. But if you engage early enough, you have passive lighting, natural lighting knowledge in concept stage work, that will inform the architecture prior to planning.

IJ: And then you can build on that and deliver it through technology, which is as we know, rapidly changing. And it doesn't necessarily now have to be for the new build because products available for home renovation- wireless and networking products, which also allow colour change, dimmable solutions can be provided as a retrofit. So without that specialist knowledge of the market place, as designers, we are probably missing out on some exposure to what's available.

IJ: There's very few people that are doing it extremely well. Rebecca is definitely one of them.