

Plus ça change...

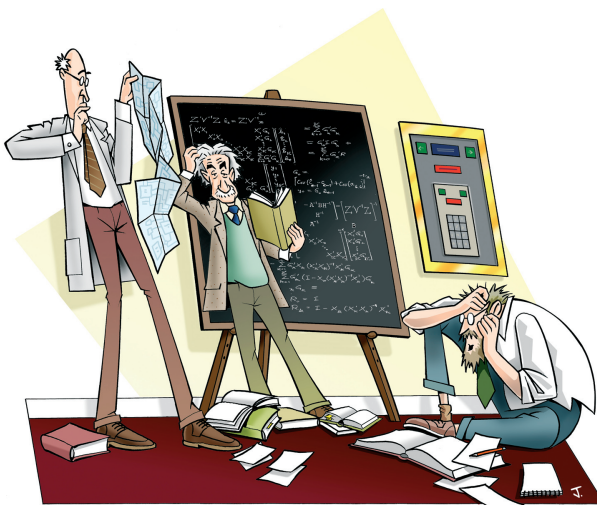
Here we are with a brand-new sparkly magazine, looking all fresh and bright-eyed. And here's me still staring out at you, jaundiced and twisted by the vicissitudes of the lighting business. But, hey, what better opportunity to open up the dusty cupboard of life and finally bin those old posing pouches?

Being creatures of habit, we have all kinds of excuses for recycling the same old shtick with nary a thought as to its true relevance. Let's take, for example (just grabbing at something out of the air for the sake of filling a page) the specification of lighting control systems. No, let's dig a bit deeper and talk about the decision to use a control system.

I've heard it said, though not from lighting designers, that lighting control systems are what the discerning client expects. What the discerning client demands. Which is odd, because my clients have the steely-eyed look of the don't-give-me-no-crap school of discerning, and they tell me the exact opposite: "We don't want one of those bloody programmed systems. There's one in my office and it's never worked and no one knows what to do with it." Which, when you think about it, is pretty damned discerning, in a robust kind of way.

Perhaps we have to ask ourselves different questions: Why are lighting designers so enthralled by the idea of a control system? Why is a certain American brand on its way to being elevated to the exalted state of becoming a generic description for this kind of hoop-la? And who thought a lighting control system was necessary in the first place?

I used to think it was a status thing – not for the client, but for the lighting designer. But then you realise that systems are as ubiquitous as a 99p downlight, though obviously more expensive, so



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it can't be about exclusivity or smartarsedness anymore. I mean, even builders talk about control systems, and you can't get much more, er, democratic than that.

Now listen up. 'Cos what we are saying – just to get to the nub of this – is that most projects do not require pre-set controls; there is no justification for scene-setting. The most that the client wants is the choice to dim a few sets of lights according to their mood. (I don't hold with the notion that bags of money under the mattress automatically results in loss of brain function – loss of good taste, perhaps, but only pop stars lose the ability to scratch their own backsides when the money rolls in.)

Anyway, I've been doing the night shift at the barricades of reaction against the onwards march of microprocessors. It's been a lonely task, let me tell you, and I think I've found a damned good reason for specifying a lighting control system. And it's got nothing to do with satisfying client needs.

You see, children, if you decide not to go down the system route then you have to find another way, and that is a way of Despair and Heartache – for it is the road of modular light switches and dimmers and who in their right mind would want to go there?

The problem is, because we have souls as delicate as a faery's weaving – we still try to dim stuff, regardless of what it is. And because manufacturers can't organise themselves to develop a standard dimming protocol for all sources we end up looking at multi-gang switchplates combining a Babel of rocker switches, rotary dimmers and push-make retractable switches. And it's not a pretty sight.

But what's an even less pretty sight is the Excel spreadsheet that you have to build, listing every switch and dimmer on every plate on the project. And don't think the electrical engineer will do that, because when you look around, there'll just be an engineer-shaped vacuum, where you could swear they'd been standing. And all you hear is a soft 'pop' as the air rushes in.

John Bullock

