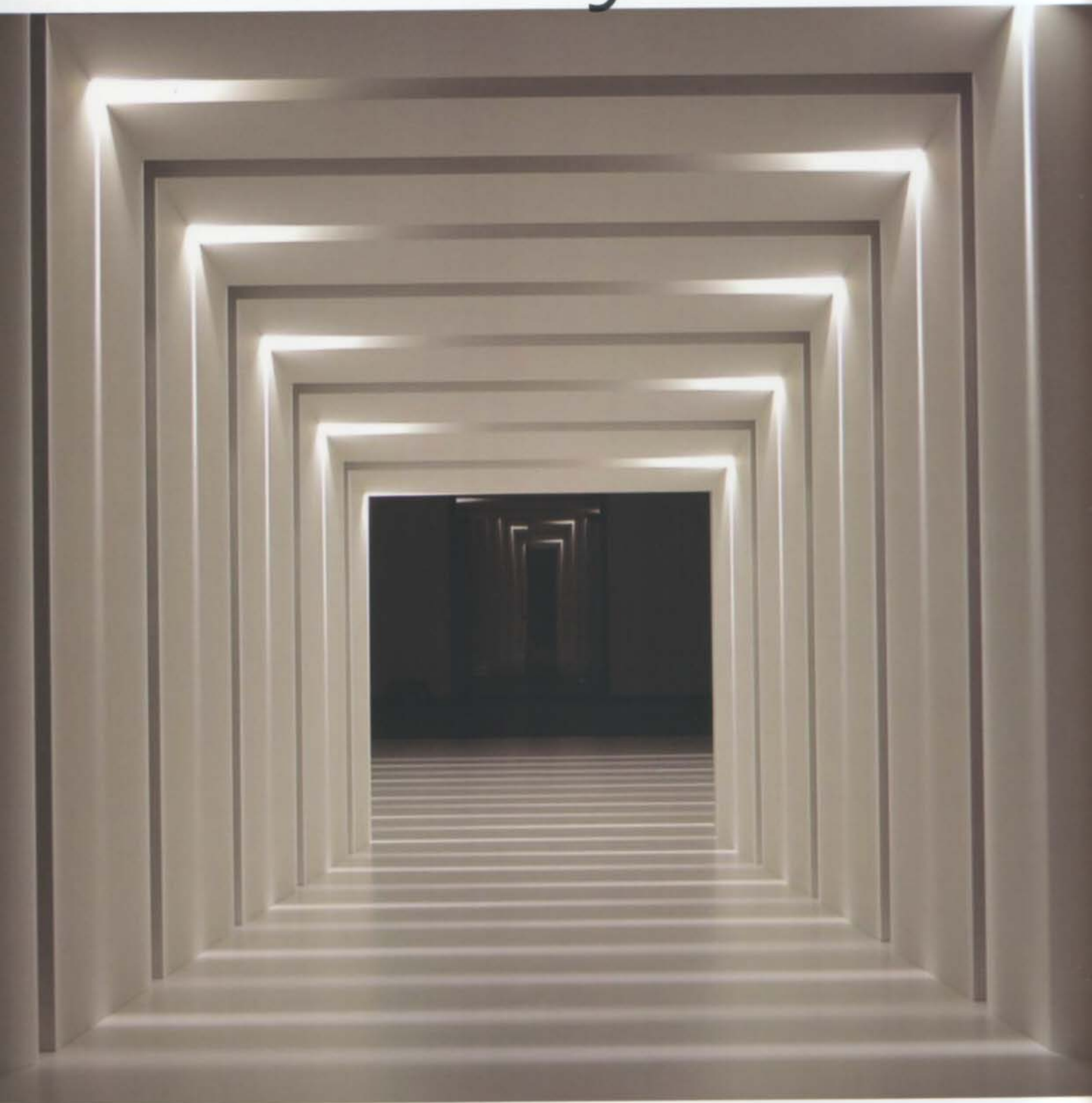


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Light philosophies: Maestro Dean Skira illuminates
In gear: turning 50 with the enigmatic 911
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Ray of Light

Internationally acclaimed lighting designer Dean Skira illuminates his world for **identity**.

TEXT: **JOANNE MOLINA**

For that little candle throws his

So shines a good deed in a weary world,"
Shakespeare in 'The Merchant of Venice.'
has been a powerful metaphor for beauty,
goodness, and so to practice the art of
design is to embrace light's rich cultural
and technological innovations. Dean Skira,
Italian-born international award-winning
designer, educator and icon, has literally
changed the way we see one another and the
world with his innovative lighting projects and
accomplishments.

Skira has taken the world by storm. His first
lighting installation, *Hooked Up*, designed for the world's leader in
residential lighting design, iGuzzini, won the
Lighting Innovation award 2012 for the most
innovative product. He won the LDA award 2012
for the best external luminaire and the iF product
award 2013. And the autumn he is expected
to be a guest speaker along with the Dubai-based
technical manager for iGuzzini, Sergio Padula,
at iGuzzini's lighting event in Beirut. But despite his
international success he has stayed true to himself,
his work, and his vision.



Skira peers through his *Hooked Up*
lighting installation



From above clockwise: Skira's *Hooked Up* lighting; his lighting project for the Novamed Polyclinic in Zagreb; and Skira's lighting design for the dental polyclinic Rident in Croatia.

"I finish every lecture with the phrase 'Lighting is not for architecture, but for the people that live in it,'" muses Skira, describing the lighting designer's challenge of thinking about artificial and natural light. "I think that reproducing natural light obviously crosses the mind of every lighting designer, but very soon we realise that it's a task we must give up: It's impossible to reproduce or duplicate the power of sun, romance of the moon and soft twinkle of stars in any 'artificial' environment. But at the same time, I think the language of 'artificial' light is nothing but a slightly modified language of natural light. It is an interesting question and it always emerges in my lectures, especially since we are eager to paint everything 'green,' forgetting in the process of this monochromatic philosophy (or in translation: money), that people should be the centre of our attention, not kWh money saved or energy consumption."

Skira's aesthetic and design philosophy are highly refined and the result of a rigorous approach to his discipline. "Integration with inspiration' is a phrase which describes my approach to blending technology with art and design. That is why my favourite projects are those where I have the freedom to express the moment in which the idea occurs, after few minutes of looking at the form and function of the building or space for which I have to provide light," Skira asserts. "After 23 years of experience, I can conclude that I developed a very personal style which is dependent on the people, architecture or interior design for which I'm providing lighting solutions. What I'm trying to say is that whether I am designing my own office, my house, choosing the clothes that I'm going to wear or the car that I'm going to drive, I have a strong opinion and personal style that I've developed throughout my life," he explains. "Naturally there are

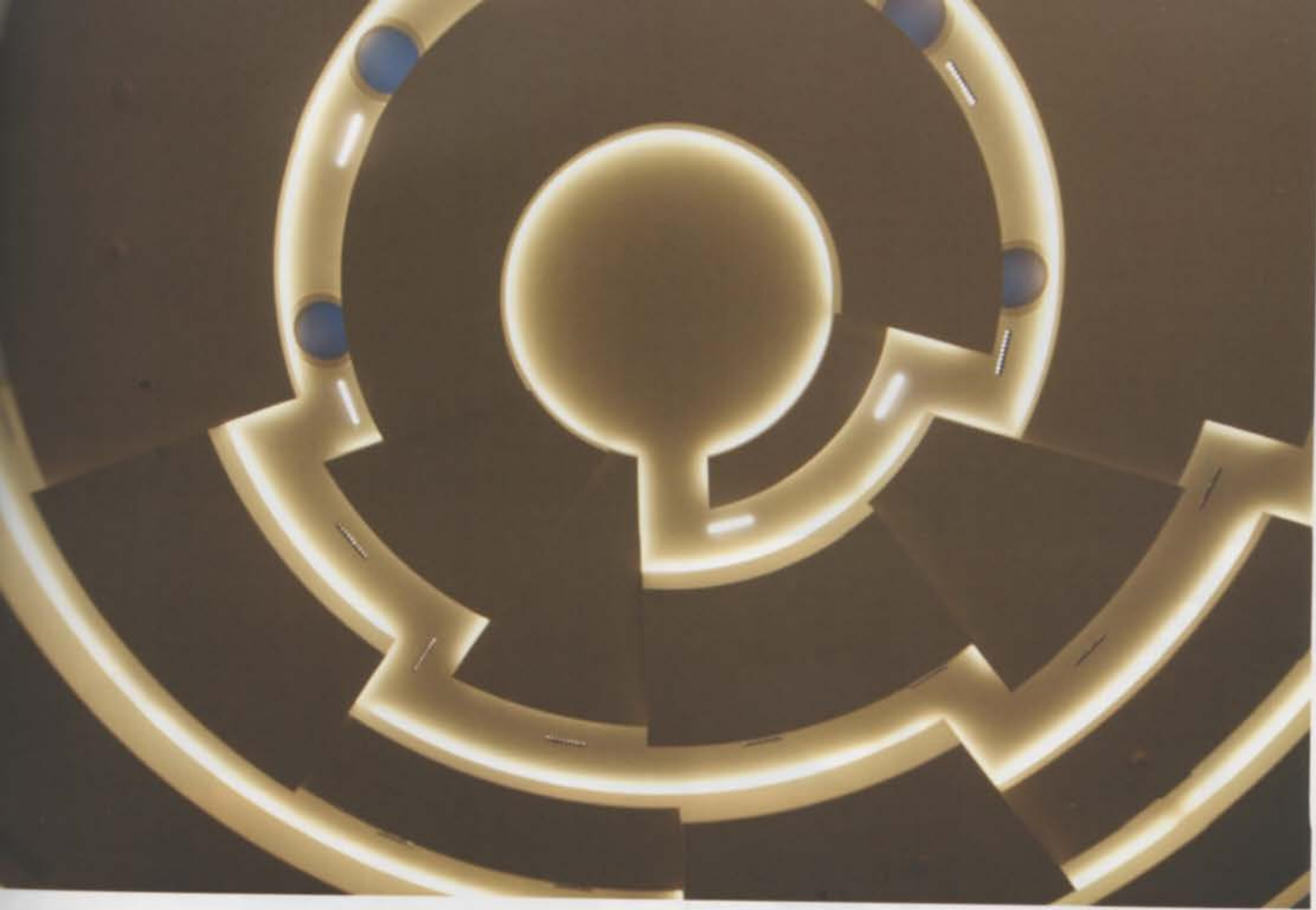
objects for which I intuitively 'click' right away, and there are those which I have difficulties finding innovative solutions that will fit the existing constraints."

Skira's fascination with lighting began with his father. "Even in my early childhood I was fascinated by light and its sources, influenced by my father's professional work in stained glass. I have always gravitated towards architecture, decoration, form and light. Not long after I arrived in New York in 1986, I was fortunate enough to meet people who were involved in the lighting business. I simultaneously entered FIT where I studied interior and lighting design. Our university featured a laboratory with top-quality equipment where the professors, all of whom had at least ten years of experience in private practice, taught the future generations everything about this field of work," he explains.

His Croatian background was also essential to the formation of his aesthetic. "Living in an area where four seasons clearly change our daily perception of light, shadow and color probably has some influence on understanding or 'learning to see' the light. I think it's crucial to be aware of the 'everyday pictures' we are surrounded with that depend on light."

Collaboration + Design Thinking

Collaboration is also instrumental for Skira, as he refers to his own team as the 'Skira tribe'. "I have a team of people that have been with me for many years and regardless of the usual workplace difficulties, I consider them an integral part of the creative process in every project we work on," says Skira. "Our office is in fact a house. We call it 'The House of Light'. The atmosphere is quite domestic, and so we feel like a tribe, almost like a family. The word 'tribe'



the strongest in moments when we approach the world outside the
s one, despite our differences."

ra is also adamant about how collaboration should extend to his
ips with architects, corporations and consumers. "Successful projects
on good collaboration. I always emphasise the importance of
n in lighting design, which assumes close cooperation with architects
or designers," he explains. "I am fortunate enough to often find myself
his where the architect and I mutually inspire each other. It is fair to
ur three-dimensional approach to lighting design is very specific and
ble. Unfortunately, there aren't always opportunities to realise these
Solid relationships between myself, the architect and the investor are
one of the links in that chain breaks, the idea cannot be realized."

Skira's most successful relationships has been *Lun-up*, designed for
"Lun-up" is the result of a precise demand that couldn't be solved by
existing products on the market," Skira explains. "I started to think
about the function, and the form simply came as a logical extension.
the form of that lamp wouldn't have been possible three years
e required technology wasn't available at that time." Technology has
y changed his lighting game. "That example clearly shows just how
t this profession is to the development of technology. Unexpectedly,
gh the form appears simple, the technological process was quite
ce I insisted on a minimalist aesthetic."

so optimistic. "We live in a time where disruptive innovation occurred
y changed the entire industry. New tools allow us to think of new

ideas. Our creative horizons are obviously widening with everything we have in
our toolbox today. Art is about channeling a certain message, where lighting can
be also a way of expressing your most personal thoughts."

Given his highly developed intellect and creative capacity, working with
corporations and consumers in a highly competitive market is another art he
has mastered. "Human interaction is crucial in every creative process, and this
is most apparent when creative ideas collide in the field of creation. When
the ego is put aside and the priority is the best result, that's where good ideas
materialise," says Skira. "Today's world and its new challenges mean that we are
all struggling in one way or another and that requires personal traits that extend
beyond typical 'professionalism'. The ability to move around different cultures is
also very important."

Skira's wit and intellectual passion are also evidenced in his insights into
the consumer world, as well as his own field. "[I] have learned a lot from
people who were not always well-intentioned," he muses. He discusses how
consumers' relationships to lighting has been Janus-faced over the last decade.
"Mass media themes like lighting pollution, energy savings, etcetera are almost
quodidian in the press and coincide mainly with the interest of selling new
products. But the side effect is that they are indirectly suggesting the importance
of lighting."

The same is true of the art and design. "Design by definition is creating
something that has to provide a specific task or function. Art is obviously about
the personal expression of an artist and it is not necessarily an item that will
make our life better—and design should be just that. In my personal opinion



PHOTO CREDIT: SANDRO LENZNER

From above clockwise: Skira's lighting design for the Novi spa and resort in Croatia; His *Lun-up* lighting (shown right) brings dramatic intrigue into the evening hours.



the word 'design' is misused in too many occasions, and is probably going to be replaced in the near future by those who live and think as designers and are not just trend followers and commercial slaves."

And while coloration seems to be a trend in the world of lighting design, Skira is quick to suggest, "Too often coloration is overused. The invention of RGB has simplified and permitted to all those with not enough ideas to forcefully try to impress others, or just 'be different'. I expect that in future good artists will be very careful before they use colour." In his own projects Skira has been very selective. "When the 'House of Light' opened in 2006 and colour was implemented in the nocturnal scenery of the building, the choice of colour was very precise, using Piet Mondrian's palette that my friend artist Bojan Sumonja chose at my request. The exterior shell of the building changes color at a specific time of night, within a specific timeline, for a specific purpose, within the specific location and surroundings."

Skira's design philosophy is equally precise. "When describing my approach, I like to talk about 'one metre of lighting design process' that contains 'one creative critical centimetre'. The process starts with the exchange of ideas. After coming to an agreement with everyone involved—understanding the form and function of the object, taking care of all the formalities which include norms and regulations—this 'creative critical centimeter' makes a difference between 'good' and 'wow.'"

Technology also plays crucial role in his creative process. "The only limiting factors in our field are the existing sources of artificial light and the fittings into which they are mounted. We are technologically limited, but there are no creative boundaries, and that ends up as perhaps the biggest problem in our profession," he confesses. "When you're trying to achieve a certain effect, you

always feel that the vision in your head needs to be accomplished, but also permanently maintained. This is why it isn't desirable to install lighting objects in inaccessible places. If a facade is damaged if the bulb stops working and it can't be replaced, then the project fails. It is important to analyse all elements – the shape of the object, its location and surroundings, which side is more accessible and which points of view are crucial," he explains.

Illuminating the Future

Despite the contradictions, tension and philosophical differences that create productive tension in the world of lighting design, Skira is as enmeshed and dedicated as ever—and still ahead of his time. "When I sit with my friends in a bar and discuss the most memorable moments in my career, they are always the ones that somebody said could not be done. I can describe more than one project where my persistence, power of persuasion and in some cases even madness, convinced everyone that it could be done," he muses.

"Hanging from a 35m church tower, pulling reflectors up by myself - after the installer said it could not be done - is certainly one of those moments. That was in 1994 and I'll leave it up to your imagination to think how many similar situations happened after that! There are also those projects which I would like to forget and I'm sure that's true of every productive, creative soul."

As for his future, he is pensive. "The future is always uncertain. I can only hope that I'll have good health so I can continue with my work for many upcoming years. I'm certainly looking forward to many fulfilling projects. What is really important for me is balancing my tight schedule due to travelling to all the destinations where my projects take me and the time I devote to the creative process that guides every project." We think his future is remarkably bright. ■