

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

BY GUY ESBERG

They're used on almost every kind of project, from churches to offices to residential complexes. In fact, because of codes and safety, they're found in all settings, from the most utilitarian to the most elegant. If you haven't guessed, the fixtures to which I'm referring belong to the high-abuse or vandal-resistant category. . . a category historically neglected by many designers and clients alike.

Given the diversity of projects on which they're found, one would expect to see an appropriate selection of fixture designs and quality levels in use. Take a good look around, however, and you'll find that these fixtures are frequently beneath the design and quality levels of the architecture to which they're applied.

Some might consider that this is too much attention to pay to such "unimportant" fixture category. Yet luminaires of this genre can have a pronounced negative impact on their surroundings. Industrial in styling, with UV-yellowed lenses framing layers of dead insects, such aesthetic abominations can all but destroy certain aspects of a project's visual appeal.

Years ago, high-abuse fixtures were designed purely on the basis of function. Since resistance to vandalism was their sole reason for existence, aesthetics weren't really considered. With many people believing that fixtures had to look tough to be tough, most fixtures looked like refugees from an industrial parts swap meet. On projects where attractive fixtures were insisted upon, the answer was usually custom in nature.

In recent years, however, some manufacturers have finally developed products far more visually pleasing than their predecessors. Their attention to aesthetics, combined with advancements in both materials and light sources, has resulted in fixtures more architecturally oriented, more resistant to abuse and less susceptible of bugs and dirt than ever before (there's even a metric for resistance to such accumulation, called the "I.P. rating").

The best fixtures also produce much less glare with lenses that can last up to a decade without noticeable discoloration. By contrast, other attractive products feature shielding that looks fine at



ALL THREE OF THESE FIXTURES WERE FOUND ON HIGH-END PROJECTS, THOUGH ONLY ONE IS APPROPRIATE TO ITS SURROUNDINGS (BOTTOM).

installation but begins to yellow after only a year or two of use.

Given the availability of superior fixtures, why does there remain such widespread use of unattractive, industrially "styled" fixtures on projects that deserve better? Can architects truly approve of fixtures that degrade the appearance of their designs? After all, we're not just talking about lighting utilitarian buildings, since the worst examples often appear where visual appeal is an obvious priority.

Charles Schrader, FAIA, an architect who has specialized in educational facilities for much of his career, related that although he has regularly specified the most architecturally appropriate fixtures available, ". . . we've often had to make a concerted effort to keep our vandal-resistant lighting specs intact; not many clients realize how much these fixtures can negatively impact the appearance of an area, so it's a natural place for them to try and cut costs."

Deb Witte of San Francisco-based Lighting By Design concurred: "Few owners take the time to consider all views of a building. They incorrectly assume that because fixtures aren't located at the main entrance, they won't be visible to people using that entrance." She observes that such fixtures often fall outside the contractual responsibilities of those most sensitive to their impact and are therefore selected by people charged only with meeting code requirements at the lowest possible cost. "High-abuse lighting often falls into the 'back of the house' category, meaning that nobody's being paid to specifically take care of it and also that it's a logical place to minimize expenditures."

Whatever the reasons, allowing vandal-resistant fixtures to negatively impact the visual quality of a project has become unnecessary. The cost to upgrade to superior fixtures is typically quite minor, particularly since relatively small quantities of such fixtures are required on most jobs.

Perhaps we should consider the following questions:

- From the owner's standpoint, does it really make sense to have a few poorly designed light fixtures compromise a project's attractiveness, particularly when considerable money is (typically) spent on other aspects of the project's appearance?
- Do designers actually want their architectural details and carefully chosen materials to share space with light fixtures that are ugly from the start—and get progressively uglier over time?
- And finally, on behalf of the public—the people who live with these projects day after day, year after year—shouldn't we put forth our best efforts to create and maintain a visual environment that's as pleasing as reasonably possible?

Since the industry has finally created some high-abuse fixtures that are both attractive and engineered to stay that way, perhaps lighting professionals should consider educating their clients about the advantages of superior vandal-resistant luminaires. As far as I can see, there are obvious benefits for everyone concerned. ■

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