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### **Architectural Lighting Design Critique**

As a professional architectural lighting designer I have been asked to write a critique on architectural lighting as it emphasizes Rome's "luxury" architecture.

Italy, right or wrong, has always been considered an elegant country and Rome, its' capital, an elegant city. But what exactly is elegance? Each culture has its standards of beauty to which its' inherent elegance is closely tied. Intellectual curiosity and tolerance have taught us however to understand and even to love, or at least to accept and appreciate, cultures that are different from ours and to enjoy, adopt and sometimes reinterpret their different types of elegance. But luxury is not necessarily linked to elegance. In fact it almost never is, and when it is, it is a totally random coincidence. Even so more and more often we see the equation luxury=elegance pretentiously proposed.

Living and working in Rome I have always thought of this city as being intrinsically luxurious since few cities in the world have the luxury of offering centuries upon centuries of architectural masterpieces to its citizens and to infinite numbers of tourists. And so to comply with what was requested of me, I have decided to compare the lighting of the Capitoline hill, the final design of which is attributed to Michelangelo, to the lighting of a deluxe hotel, the quintessence of luxury in its modern interpretation. Centuries of history have transformed the first into a culturally "elegant" architectural phenomenon, an intellectual "luxury". The second is elegantly designed according to today's standards – therefore luxurious by definition. Therefore the comparison between the lighting of these two pieces of luxury architecture which are so different can be very interesting.

Ascending the steps of the Capitoline hill at night the first impression is that of the beauty and harmony of the architectural space but then the lighting of this space overwhelms one with a sense of irritation. Architectural lighting, after a careful analysis of the architecture, should interpret and aid in conveying the essential lines of the soul of the building. It should simply help the perception of the personality of the original object which is temporarily not visible because of the darkness. It should not add color, or distort shapes and volumes with false shadows and harsh lighting. And it definitely should not be used as "make-up".

Without a doubt city governments must try to save energy costs using efficient lighting where possible but in the central square, in the heart of Michelangelo's masterpiece that is the Capitoline hill, the place to use lampposts with sodium light bulbs ? Their

intensely bright yellow light spreads everywhere and falsifies the colors of the materials used in the surrounding buildings.

The lighting, appropriately warm toned, to the left and the right of the balustraded windows of the laterally located Palazzo Nuovo and Palazzo dei Conservatori buildings together with the lighting to the left and right of the windows of the central Palazzo Senatoriale building create sketchy broken lighting lines that visually interrupt the symmetrical continuity of the façades, resulting in a general false perception of their architectural harmony.

The illumination of the continuous balustrade that crowns the three splendid buildings is, literally speaking, chilling. Perhaps the intention was to emphasize the difference in building material, but the quantity and the color of the illumination used separates these parapets from the main volume of the buildings. Visually they become a cold and almost temporary add-on, seemingly ready to be blown away by a sudden gust of wind.

As the square ceiling vaults under the porches of the lateral buildings have some ornamental bas-reliefs they have been lit using two small spotlights installed on two opposing corners. Predictably those two spots asymmetrically wash the symmetrical bas-reliefs with a less than excellent result.

I don't want the reader to think from what I have said that the lighting of this important architectural feature is the work of an amateur as it is not. There are many ideas, much intuition and undoubtedly a lot of work behind it. What, in my opinion, is missing is a truly in-depth analysis of the architecture and this has led to visual misinformation and a gussied up architectural jewel.

A seemingly different approach was used for the five star luxury Marriott Grand Hotel Flora in Rome. This hotel just inside the ancient Aurelian city walls of Rome was built around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has, because of its location overlooking the stunning greenery of Villa Borghese park, always been a luxury hotel. Even though the building, in the context of Roman standards cannot be considered a masterpiece like the Capitoline hill it is still a quality, though unpretentious, structure.

One of the main objectives of hotel lighting is naturally that of attracting guests, to sell a service and to create an image in the mind of the potential client. Therefore the lighting must make everything appear in the best possible "light". The lighting designer must combine the prosaic sale of a service with the more "noble" task of presenting the building in such a way to perceive the forms and colors at their best.

The architectural elements that quite clearly define the personality of this building are the two original signs with the name of the hotel on the roof, the loggia beneath it, the cantilever roof cornice immediately below, the heavily decorated "macro frieze", the parapet of the three main balconies, the eight caryatids and finally, the small tympanums of the façade. The xenon fixtures used give off a warm light perfectly in tune with the chromatic key of the building and achieve a uniform quality on the façade. Moreover since the fixtures have a very small aluminum housing they are almost invisible during the day. Halogen uplights were used for the lighting of the two original hotel signs atop the building and of the loggia on the top floor. The main entrance on via Veneto ( Rome's luxury street by definition ) is lit by traditional style lanterns installed under the large entrance canopy. These decorative fixtures were especially designed

for the project and each lantern structure incorporates metal halide downlights which are virtually invisible. An intriguing visual result has been obtained playing with the contrast between the warm and inviting traditional incandescent light emanating from the lanterns and the cool metal halide lighting which creates pools of light seemingly from nowhere on the gray city pavement below. The tympanums on the façade are lit by an incandescent "lighting rope" installed on the bottom of the horizontal section of these architectural elements. These fixtures pleasantly enhance the visual triangle suggested by each tympanum. Finally It must be said that a dimmer system that would have perfected the façade lighting giving it a touch less garish general look, quite incomprehensibly was not installed.

One could describe the warm and invitingly soft illumination created for the hotel's interior spaces or could explain the interior spaces very sophisticated dimmer system. etc. etc. But since there is not an interior lighting project on the Capitoline hill to talk about I prefer to conclude the comparison of the two different architectural lighting design projects.

During the daylight hours these two examples of architecture in Rome can be judged exactly for what they are; the first an intellectually and visually luxurious complex of buildings encompassing the city hall of Rome and a group of museums, the second a pleasant early twentieth century building being used as a luxury hotel.

At nighttime however something is not quite as one would expect. The first seems falsely embellished and its original and intrinsic prized architecture made more so by the passage of centuries tends to change into something else under the effect of a illumination studied perhaps more for distracted tourists than to honor and bring alive the exact meaning that this masterpiece has for the city and more in general for a culture. I believe that lighting of artistically and historically important works should be studied with a sense of respect.

On the other hand, I think that the architectural lighting of the five star hotel appears to be designed and carried out with sensitivity fulfilling the task of enhancing the existing architectural features of a nice, but rather common, building that easily could have been left to blend in with all of the other nice building that surround it. This, for a five star deluxe hotel, would have been conceptually lethal but what instead has been done fully reveals its personality.

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