

OPENLIGHT closes

6 years Design for Opportunity at ILI

Rombout Frieling interviewed by Carina Weijma

After six successful years, the OPENLIGHT program will end. Positioned as creative lab of the Intelligent Lighting Institute, OPENLIGHT experimented with new light applications and delivered large experiences. From the summer onwards, program head and creative director Rombout Frieling will concentrate on the work with his own studio and ventures. In this interview, Rombout looks back at the history of OPENLIGHT.

How did OPENLIGHT start?

When the Intelligent Lighting Institute started to emerge back in 2009, I had just been approached by the late professor Kees Overbeeke (ID), a great person, to tutor students on lighting projects. The multidisciplinary field of lighting turned out to be a great fit with my broad expertise between art and design on the one hand and hardcore engineering on the other. Soon after professor Emile Aarts, at the time scientific director of the institute and also Science Officer at Philips, asked me if I was interested in scaling my activities to a 'Design for Opportunity' program

next to the existing, more traditional research program lines in the ILI.

What was the need for the OPENLIGHT program?

The world of light was rapidly changing in 2010: It was clear that LED lighting would replace virtually any existing light source, and that the tiny, energy effective LEDs would offer an unparalleled design freedom. This gave rise to a great number of opportunities like festivals, events and design challenges. We called it the 'Liberation of Light' and we positioned OPENLIGHT as a very

different program, able to react on such opportunities rapidly, in contrast to the other ILI programs who had a focus on longer term research/projects. Instead of publishing research, our remit was to reach out to the world with installations in which new light concepts could actually be experienced in real life, while providing students with a unique and often international learning experience.

What were the first activities?

In the first year we started by turning an entire hotel into a light experience at the Ghent Light Festival. We, amongst others, developed Shadow Wall, a network of sensors and lights which made experiential what Intelligent Lighting could actually mean. The wall also travelled to Moscow. In Beijing we demonstrated how lighting solutions could contribute to tackling some of Beijing's urgent societal issues. During a two-week project I formed a

The typical OPENLIGHT integrated way of working: here for the Beijing Design Week >>



« Rombout Frieling

collaborative team with Master students from TU/e and from Tsinghua University. Instead of inventing a question at home, building a solution and shipping an installation to China, this intercultural team worked bottom-up. Students spent 48 hours with Beijing's cleaners, bus drivers and the elderly, revealing some moving insights and social phenomena in China. For example: "How do you relax in a crowd?" The team addressed these issues by a series of rather clever lighting interventions in three industrial spaces at the Beijing Design Week. These experiences showed how lighting solutions could address the needs of Beijing's citizens.

What was the unique learning experience you talked about?

When I was a student myself, I mainly worked on hypothetical projects. Projects that did not get produced let alone that they were really used by people. In my working life I soon realised that most design decisions come from dealing with the 'real world': Weather influences, viewing angles, visitor numbers, financial constraints: those are the practical factors which define a design. By involving students in the entire process of conceiving, designing, engineering and realizing an



installation, we managed to educate students how this 'dealing with the real world' is an essential part of a creative process. Something that is quite unique and valuable in a university environment, I think.

Why does the program end now?

The institute committed to running a six-year program. In the current political and financial climate, it seemed not feasible to continue further in a way that allowed for further growth of OPENLIGHT as a lab within ILI. ILI will focus on other goals. Next to this, observing the trend of 'light' being used by other institutes, designers, manufacturers, and industry, the progressive role we had is completed. With our light installations we wanted to provoke, spark the interest of the public and deliver a first step towards evidence. It is nice to see how we inspired for instance our partners, like Sorama, to develop new smart lighting applications, and I hope that our experiences have inspired others worldwide too. It suits TU/e and the Brainport region to be the first to experiment practically in emerging fields. Now this pioneering role of OPENLIGHT is completed.

What is the legacy you leave behind?

I enjoy the many of our ex-students who keep working on interesting projects. I also enjoy the fact that we still have a couple of installations which travel through Europe with our licensing partners (IRIS and WAVES). Our world is constantly changing and our view of the world changes often unnoticed. But often we ourselves generate these transitions. Are we aware of our impact on our everyday environment? In most of the OPENLIGHT installations, we suddenly and jointly experience our influence on the environment. With OPENLIGHT we also contributed to the cultural and societal awareness of students. We were proud to combine our experimental role with the education of students. "I am also grateful to be given an opportunity to lead such an initiative, and grateful to our staff and students for making things happen".

If people are interested in previous projects, can they still contact you?

Yes, they certainly can email my studio on mail@rombout.design

