



interview by Vilma Barr

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A CHALLENGING PRACTICE

Denise Fong of Candela applies her lighting acumen to healthcare, sustainability, and the challenges of balancing family with corporate responsibilities. Vilma Barr talks with her about the industry's rocketing pace of change.

Denise Fong admits to falling into lighting design. Figuratively.

Fong's degree in interior design from Washington State University was a circuitous pathway to a career in lighting. "I realized when I was in college that I didn't know enough about lighting to be a good interior

designer," says Fong. "Selecting finishes or planning open office layouts wasn't what I was cut out to do."

Her personal view of interior design as a profession encompassed the entire environment, including lighting. "I was intrigued by the combination of art and science that lighting design offered."

She decided to redirect her design talents to lighting. "Lighting to me was a fourth dimension. It's not stone or fabric that you could touch, but it has a critical influence on a building's interior space." At that time, however, neither her training nor experience provided Fong with enough lighting education to offer the kind of integrated design services she felt was needed in



Left: The Uniqlo flagship store in Shanghai. Fong relished the prospect of working on a project half a world away from her base. *Upper right:* Fong specializes in healthcare lighting design and sustainability and contributed to the interior lighting of MultiCare Good Samaritan Hospital in Puyallup, Washington. *Lower right:* Whimsical lighting design adorns Shriners Children’s Hospital in Portland, Oregon.

her region’s marketplace.

Through IALD’s internship program, Fong spent a three months with a lighting design studio. Her plan was to bring her newly-minted lighting expertise to an interior design firm. “I was a bit naïve,” Fong admits. “Lighting, I discovered, was a big subject with lots to learn. Fortunately, the company that I interned with offered me a full-time job, which I accepted. Even then, I thought I’d work in the lighting field for up to three years and then return to interiors. But it just never happened. Lighting captured

my imagination and interest and I’ve been here ever since,” she explains.

“Everything I know about lighting I learned on the job, through mentors, professional education events, asking questions, and studying on my own. The knowledge gained with every finished project is applied to succeeding assignments,” she emphasizes.

Fong joined Candela 18 years ago, and is now a principal and lighting design practice leader. Candela is a wholly owned subsidiary of Sparling, a 65-year-old multi-professional

design organization based in Lynnwood, Washington, near Seattle. Up until the early 1990s, there was no separate lighting design group in the organization. Lighting design services were undertaken by the firm’s electrical engineers.

Sparling established Candela as a separate brand rather than a subdivision of the existing brand. Now, Candela works together with Sparling on its projects, which comprise about 50 percent of Candela’s commissions. The balance comes from architects, including those who retain Sparling



Above left: The Chandler Fashion Centre in Arizona. *Above right:* The Museum of History and Industry in South Lake Union neighborhood of Seattle, Washington, is one of the largest museums in the state. *Below left:* The PACCAR Hall in the Foster School of Business at the University of Washington. *Below right:* An examination room on the Issaquah campus of the Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, another example of Fong's work in healthcare settings.

for engineering and other technical services.

Her involvement in planning and management is across the board for lighting design projects, including office buildings, education, and retail. Fong's specialties have evolved in the areas of healthcare lighting design and sustainability. She has written and presented extensively on both topics.

Evidence-based information relating to healthcare lighting is integrated into

her department's project planning. "Combining research findings with the development of lighting strategies is important to delivering better facilities for patient care and the financial performance for the healthcare institution, even for projects with tight budgets," Fong believes. "Healthcare administrators and decision makers now understand the impact that the hospital experience has on the health and well-being of its patients," she says.

In addition to identifying the facility's care-giving needs, a comprehensive lighting program for a healthcare institution must also support its brand in an increasingly challenging economy. "A hospital is not unlike any other business, and must continue to attract patients to remain viable in its market," she points out. "We also have to factor in the role of the complex lighting needs of the facility with the demands of the applicable energy codes, along with



Left and above: The ACT Theatre in Seattle Washington, Candela produce the interior lighting design during the renovation of the historic building.

meeting LEED or the Green Guide for Health Care Standards for Energy Efficiency,” she says.

Wayfinding has become an important element of the healthcare environment to which lighting is contributing. “Improved wayfinding in a healthcare facility eases the stress for both visitors and patients,” Fong has found. “At MultiCare Good Samaritan Hospital in Puyallup, Wash., we integrated colors and lighting in a hierarchical way that facilitates wayfinding.”

Sustainability is Fong’s second area of specialization at Candela. She reports that the concepts of sustainability have become an easier sell to clients than they were a half-dozen years ago. “Today, they grasp the benefits of daylighting, energy controls, sources that utilize sustainable manufacturing processes and resources, and paybacks for higher efficiency light sources, lower maintenance and reduced cooling loads are being integrated into design briefs and regularly implemented,”

she reports.

“Clients have to be comfortable with recommending the incorporation of these practices,” she says. “Change happens when people can apply experiences in their personal life. One example is the energy efficient lamps that they buy at Costco for their home. Then they can transfer the positive evaluation to their professional facility responsibilities. They’ll say, ‘Oh, that wasn’t so hard.’ From a small personalized experiment they get familiar with, it’s easier for them to apply it on a larger scale for their organization.”

Fong is a member of the major professional lighting groups, and has been active in an industry-wide adaptation of sustainability programs. She participates in IALD’s sustainability committee efforts headed by Glenn Heimiller relating to codes. “The committee’s task is to gather information on how other organizations develop energy codes as

they relate to lighting and compliance, to recommend a unified approach that balances energy reduction with quality installations,” Fong says.

Another IALD initiative that she supports is developing an international standard for a professional credential. She observes confusion about the difference in the existing identifiers in the lighting profession such as IALD, LC, IES, NCQLP and several others. “Establishing this credential would provide clarity for those who provide professional lighting design services and those who provide other services within the lighting industry. Eventually,” she hopes, “large purchasers of design services such as the GSA (the U.S. government’s General Services Administration) will require that a credentialed lighting designer be part of its projects’ design teams.

Fong cites three major on-going challenges: personal, as a lighting design professional, and as a firm leader. “On a personal level, balancing the needs of my family with the needs of my company has always been a challenge. Most companies don’t relate to a sick child, or dinner that needs to be on the table, or homework that needs supervision. Our clients have deadlines they expect us to meet. Fortunately I have a very understating husband who has done more than his fair share in raising our children.”

The speed of change that has enveloped the lighting industry is another challenge. “I wish I could dedicate a block of time everyday just to learning about the newest advances in the industry,” she admits.

“I’m in the position of having to be aware of our firm’s activities from the 30,000-foot-view as well as being immersed in some of the everyday minutia of getting a project designed and built,” Fong says.

“I’m a stockholder in Sparling, a corporation with a Board of Directors, a different responsibility from a sole proprietorship or a small partnership.



While I have a lot of autonomy, I can't act unilaterally. I'm fortunate that all stockholders are also employees of the firm, so the emphasis on working for the good of the team underpins everything we do."

Her lighting team she describes as really terrific designers on whom she depends daily to deliver the high-quality design that has been the firm's image since its founding.

"Like many professional service businesses in the last few years, Sparling and Candela have dealt with providing excellent service to our clients with constant pressure to reduce fees, keep up with new tools to deliver our work, train our staff, and attract top talent. I'd like to say that we've solved those problems. but it's an ongoing process. I tell myself it's good to have challenges. Otherwise, what fun would it be to come to work?"

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HIGHLIGHTS

Projects that you would like to change:

I've been reminded several times lately that on large projects—designed 4-5 years ago and just now going into construction—that if I had it to do over, I'd use fewer fluorescent and metal halide sources and more LEDs.

Projects you admire:

One of my favorite buildings is Steven Holl's Chapel of St. Ignatius at Seattle University, a tiny gem of a building where daylight and color combine in a low-tech but sophisticated way to create a palpable spirit within. I remember my visit after it opened. The priest there was so excited, he was literally dancing.

Projects you dislike:

I dislike buildings where color is used gratuitously, for the sake of exploiting a technology. If it's used, it must tell a story the viewer understands. The 'wow' of color changing light gets old fast, particularly if it's a permanent installation.

Lighting Hero:

I've never liked the word 'hero' because I think it puts a person on an unrealistic pedestal and implies something near perfection. That said, I am grateful to many mentors in my career, the first of whom was Jules Horton. I'm not sure I could list all the things he taught me, but respect for your colleagues—the importance of the team and following your curiosity—were near the top.

Notable projects:

- Ladder Creek Falls, Newhalem Washington. How often in your career do you have the opportunity to light a historic waterfall? The color here is not gratuitous but relates to the original 1928 lighting scheme when electric light was still considered a new invention.
- Border Crossings, Blaine, Washington and San Ysidro, California. Technically challenging, as the managing agency stressed providing excellent visibility on many different levels. For the San Ysidro project, it's a Design Excellence project with a net-zero energy goal.
- Uniqlo Flagship, Shanghai. Like all retail the design expectations are high, time is short and everything has to come together at the last possible second. This had the added challenge of being a half-a-world away.
- Pacific Science Center, IMAX addition. Seattle, Washington. The IMAX pavilion is an orb that is partially contained in a glass box that 'floats' in a neon 'moat' The detail is continuous inside and outside the building. It's held up well over time.

Most memorable project:

My children. If you knew them, the answer would be obvious. Of course, you are really asking about my professional career and I don't know how to answer that because it's like asking me to pick my favorite child. I've loved most projects even though they sometimes drove me crazy...just like my real children!

Current projects:

Boeing 737 Studio, Everett Washington; Microsoft Office Building Renovation, Redmond, Washington; Amazon Office Building, Seattle, Washington; Santa Clara Valley Medical Center Bed Building, Santa Clara, California; University Village, Seattle, Washington; Tiger Trails at Safari Park, Escondido, California.