

designing lighting

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DAWN OF THE INVISIBLE LIGHT ■ THE BUSINESS OF LIGHTING DESIGN™ WITH MARCO STIGNANI

Not
Lost

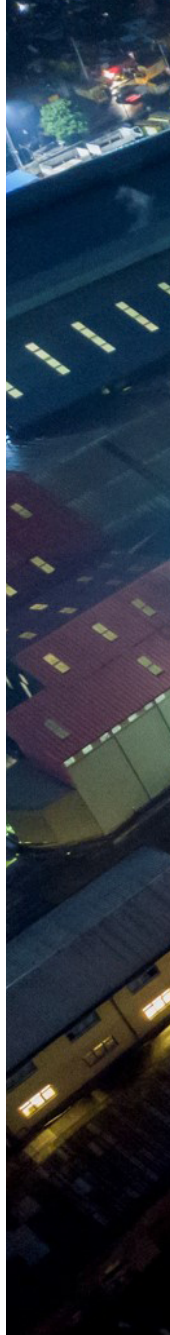
INTRANSLATION

An
Interview
with Italian
Designer
Marco
Stignani

By **RANDY REID**



In the United States, the lighting designer is the first person after the architect. Not in Italy. ” — Marco Stignani



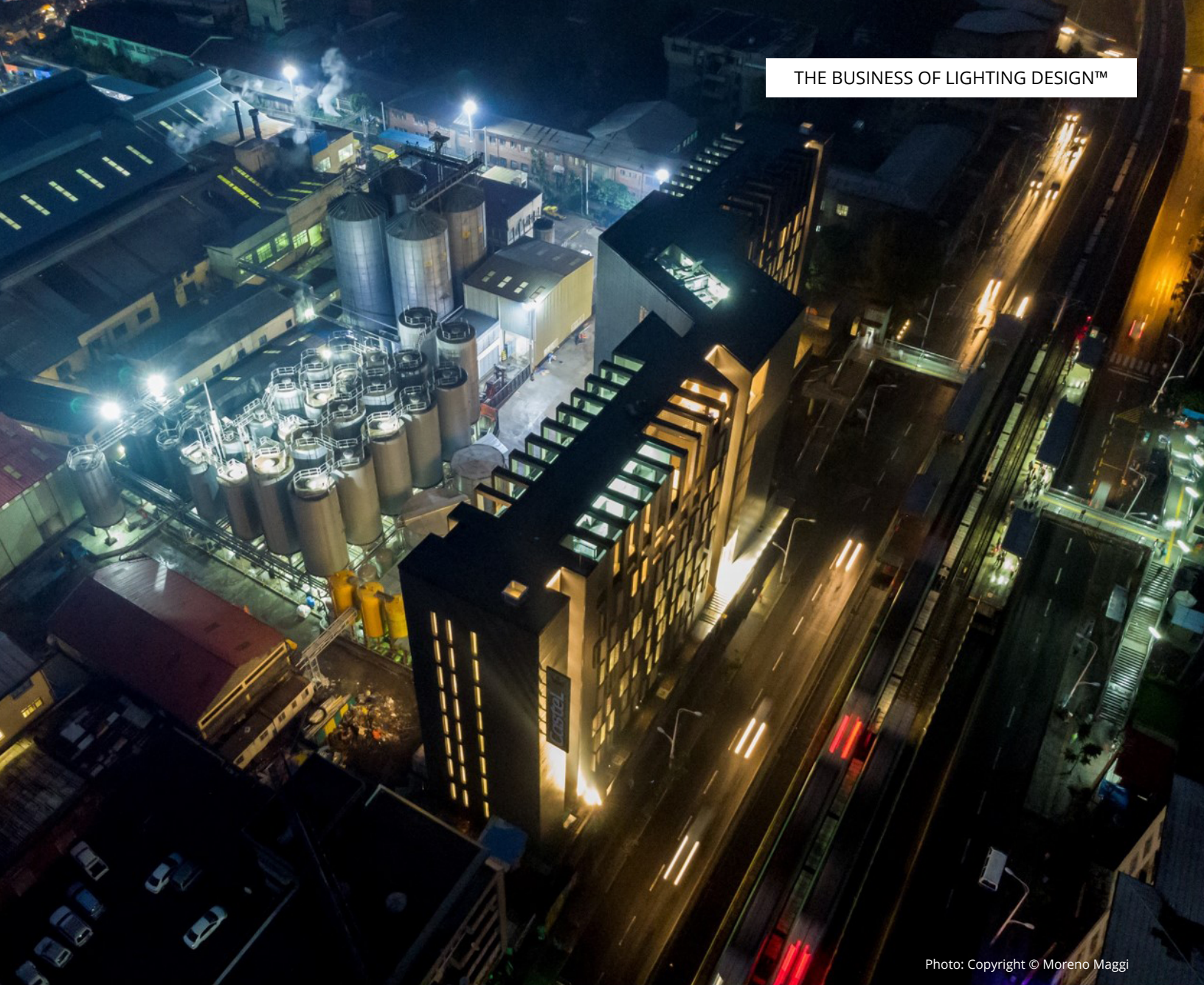


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Last month, I met Marco Stignani for lunch—he took the train up from Rome to meet me in Milan. Despite my inability to speak Italian and Stignani's limited English, we were able to have an in-depth conversation about his lighting career with the help of Google Translate and our exceptional waiter.

Stignani found his passion for lighting at a young age, helping out in his family's workshop, founded just over a decade before he was born with the initial goal of distributing the best lighting fixtures in Italy. As he spent his time disassembling and reassembling these fixtures, he came to appreciate the complexity of their mechanics, eagerly rejoining the family business as an adult after completing military service.

With a few more years of experience under his belt—and the invention of the first lighting calculation programs—Stignani began offering his design services to various architecture and engineering firms. He first took on internships with Italian manufacturers and eventually went on to support world-class companies like ERCO, Trilux, and Zumtobel.

Stignani also credited his early career success to courses he took at these companies saying, "I took in-depth courses and refresher courses at the best Italian manufacturers and foreign companies. I'd travel to companies like ERCO, Artemide, FLOS and spend a few weeks just learning and absorbing everything."

By the early 2000s, Stignani and his brother Luciano were ready to make their mark on the family business. Stignani became Director of Stignani Illuminazione in partnership with his brother, and the two worked together to make a name for the company in the Roman and Italian lighting market. Under their leadership, the business increasingly focused on lighting design, initially designing for free. Their first big job was for Montedison, an Italian chemical company. Stignani noted, "At the time, lighting software did not exist, so I was designing only with drawings and mathematical equations."

In 2010 as Italy was hit by a recession, the two brothers began to consider halting their lighting distribution business. Three years later, they followed through and Stignani dedicated himself



designers on projects. He explained, "In the United States, the lighting designer is the first person after the architect. Not in Italy. The engineer has the final say on electrical, which includes lighting, so the lighting designer is not necessarily needed." He went on to say, "Even more, lighting is looked at first when they want to reduce costs.. If they need to make cuts or substitutes, they aren't going to touch the other materials, for example, travertine."

Stignani also explained that the certification process in Europe is not as strict as in the United States, "I was designing a luminaire for a special project and used a company for the LED components. Since the LED was already certified, the engineer just needed to get approval for the electrical system and not the complete luminaire."

Italian lighting designers have similar billing structures to their US counterparts, the main difference being the timing of the final payment. Stignani said

he usually divides the project into four phases and a typical pay structure consists of 25% each after the first and second phase, and 30% for the third phase, with 20% at the end. "The difference," he added, "is that the Italian manufacturing companies often give away the lighting project taking away professionalism and work from professional lighting designer."

As we concluded our lunch, we discussed color trends and I asked if he was seeing warmer color temperatures. He explained that Northern Italy does have different CCT trends, and he prefers 3000K for indoors, and uses 4000K for gardens. Stignani also noted that 4000K is best for travertine; and 2700 for Roman brick.

I made a new friend and learned a little about Italian lighting design, and the waiter earned a very nice tip! ■

wholly to the lighting design profession. Since then, he has worked on several international projects, spoken at conferences and workshops all over Italy, and continued to grow his passion for lighting.

With his lengthy career and work spanning across the globe, Stignani has seen firsthand the international differences in how lighting design is managed as a business. For example, one of his latest projects, a BGI Castel Headquarters, exposed him to the normalities of the lighting design business in Ethiopia. The building construction began before the design was done--a practice that would be unheard of in the EU.

The project was a truly global effort. All of the materials for the project were designed in Rome then transported to the construction site in Addis Ababa. As a result, the delivery of these materials

lengthened the project, as transit time required one month by boat and two weeks by truck. Stignani also had to deal with currency conversion from Euros to Ethiopian birr. Despite these obstacles, only four of the 2600 luminaires used for the project had issues and those issues were attributed to an incorrect mounting.

"We got luminaires from four different sites. I visited all four sites to check on production and shipping. Once everything arrived at the project, you have to work with what you have", said Stignani. He added that he was relieved when he visited the construction site just a month before the opening and found that everything was assembled according to the design. At the end of the project, Stignani worked with the team installer on the Dali control system.

Another cultural difference Stignani noted in the lighting design business is the lack of prioritization of lighting