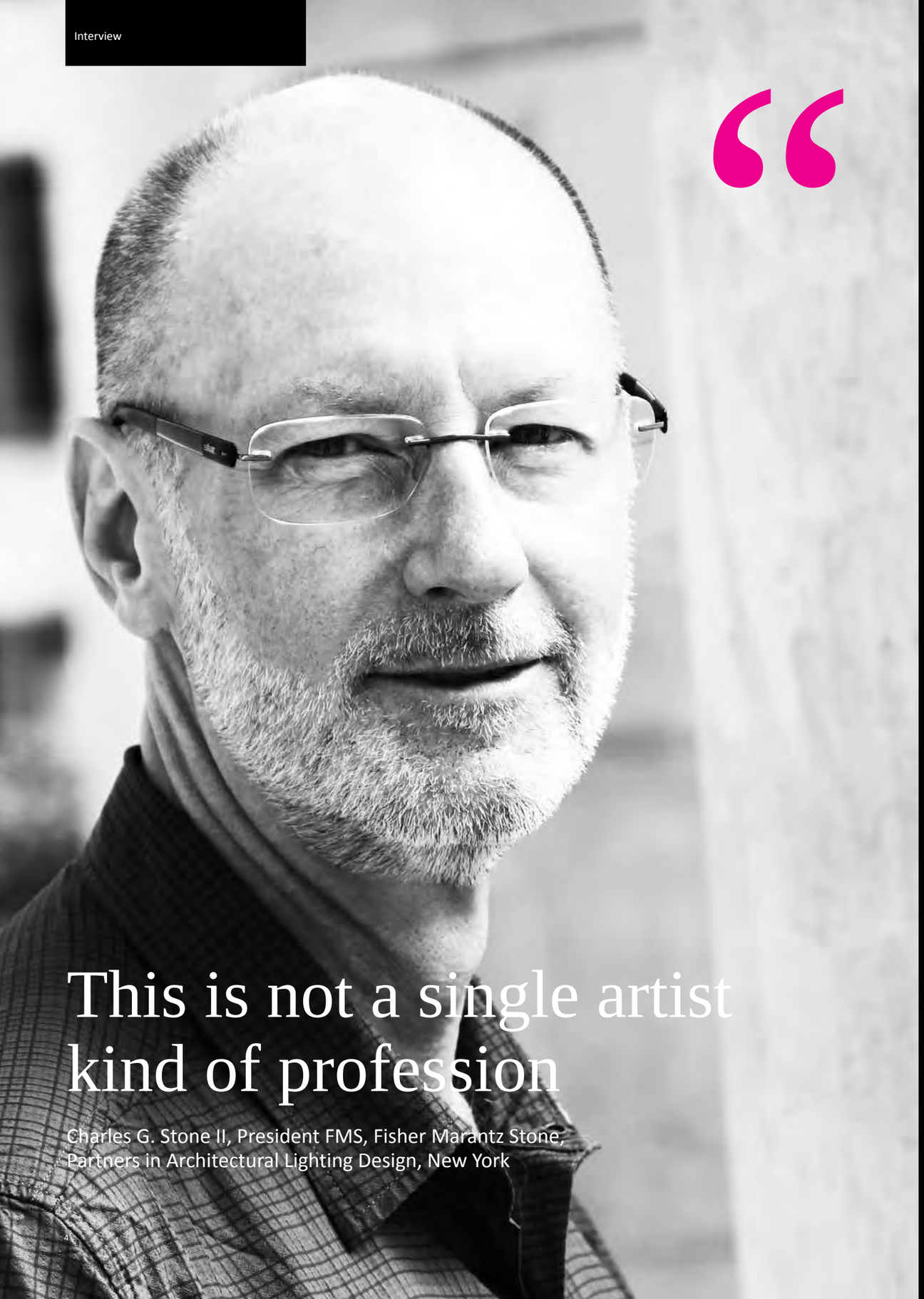

This is not a single artist kind of profession

Charles G. Stone II, President FMS, Fisher Marantz Stone, Partners in Architectural Lighting Design, New York

What was your initial startpoint to enter the world of lighting?
I was about 11 years old and I wanted to be a rock & roll singer. But that didn`t work out. I was playing with lights both in school and at the local community theater. I was quite sure I wanted to be a lighting designer before I knew there was such a profession.

And what was the next step to work with light?
Working in theatre through all my high school and university days. I got excited by using light and what it could do to excite others.

How long have you done this?
Well I guess it must be 47 years now, because I was 11 when it began. It was much to the dismay of my parents. They thought it was not a good idea. But anyway, here I am.

When you had your first project, were you nervous?
I probably was. But remember that in our profession you don`t have just one project and then the second and then the third. You have 3 or 4 or 5 and the next month a few more. Was there really a first project? Probably not, and besides I was the junior assistant in the beginning. My first project was probably learning to use the copy machine.

If you remember all the hundreds of projects you have been involved in. Was there any one spectacular project where you were emotionally most engaged in?
If there was I would never answer the question because you wouldn`t want any client to think his project is not the best.

Was there ever a “disaster” project?
Each disaster is a learning opportunity. One that I remember very well. It was an office tower. We came to the end and met the owner at another tower across the street to look at it. And I thought “This is really good. It looks exactly like the rendering we have done”. And it was a very good match: the sense of the building completed in reality and the sense of the sketches in the presentation. And I thought great. And the client said something like: “It`s not bright enough”. And I said: “But it`s just like the rendering”. And he said: “You are fired”. And so it was a good lesson - a real disaster. If the client is not happy it doesn`t matter what the renderings look like. So there`s the lesson.

Architectural lighting is separated from theatre lighting at FMS. What are the similarities or differences?
Time and point of view. In the last decade we have seen the influence of theatre on architectural lighting. It is not only colour and colour changing, but also the expectation of dynamic light. The fundamental difference in the two sides of our studio is, that in the theatre you sit in a chair and the scene changes in front of you or around you. In architecture you move through the “theatre”. Understanding these two points of view is important for any lighting designer.

FMS claims “We create magic”. How can you achieve magic in an office building?
Look at it differently. It is absolutely true. Here it is why it has to be true: The client doesn`t need to pay me to do calculations or to pick light fixtures or to light up a building because many people can do this. The manufacturers can do it. Engineers can do it. So when the architect or the owner comes to us he doesn`t come to buy a lighting design. He comes to buy magic because my portfolio is full of magic. They will come and hire FMS because we are going to give them something special. I explain to my young staff: nobody comes to us for a good job, they come to us for a great job. You can say this is just talk for hype or sales but it is true. They don`t come to me for a regular project. They want something special and that special thing is magic. So yes, if someone walks into an office building every day and it looks terrific and they say “Wow”, that´s magic.

Is there always a story?
Yes. Especially when I make presentations or speeches. Yes the pictures are important but what people want to hear is a story. It`s always the story that causes people to listen. >

You are engaged in Asia, throughout the Americas and in many other parts of the world. Are there different ways of storytelling?
Well, I have thought a lot about this question. Cultural preferences are an important parameter in design. But this gets confusing because, for example, the Bejing client hires a New York designer because they want something of New York - not because they want an interpretation of Chinese culture from somebody in New York. They can get that somewhere else. So this gets confused. It´s not so clear to me. In addition, consider what the jet plane and the internet do for mixing up all the ideas from cities that are far apart with completely different cultures. There are two things going on: there is cultural interaction but also something specific and imported from another place.

But I think one thing is the same around the world: the complexity of the building technology. With this rising complexity; Is it more difficult now to realize a good integrated lighting solution recognizing all the different building technologies?
The most difficult thing is that the people who manage the buildings, the facility staff, they have to do a lot of education too. This takes too long. This complexity is a big problem. Project after project I see - not just mine, many - it`s so complicated, nothing ever works right. So I am trying all the time to make it simple, simple, simple. Buildings are organic. Architects know this. But this is becoming a bigger and bigger problem for lighting designers with the emphasis not on just energy saving but digital lighting. All this solid state lighting is much more complicated. When you made light with a tungsten lamp you have two wires and you turn the switch and light comes out. Now you have control gear, drivers, complicated dimmers, more complicated light loss factors and on and on. It´s much more difficult that it was just a decade ago.

Except the fact of efficiency, is the LED technology progress in lighting?
It´s clearly driven, as you say, by efficiency. However I was completely wrong about how long it would take for LED to be viable for so many applications. I thought it would take another ten years; and, I had been saying that LEDs were going to be a transitional technology. But I think I was wrong. The LED and other technologies, are evolving so quickly: How they make the diodes, how the heat management is done, and how the voltage is being handled with control gear. The opportunity that is presented is very attractive: The form factors for light fixtures can dramatically change. This is very disruptive because all of the tooling you have for 150mm deep fixtures is going to get rusty. Because the new form factors can be much more shallow and smaller. But small is not always better, because smaller is brighter and this too will change. All the parameters that created dimensionality for light fixtures going back to gas lamps and the associated profiles are now subject to revision.

Is this then a battle between efficiency and light quality?
No, not at all. I used to think that was going to be the toughest challenge, but it`s not. There are two or three things going on here: The fairest or freest way to regulate energy consumption for lighting would be to go to the door of the building, make a determination for the total wattage of the building and say to the designer: There you have it. Use it the way you want. That`s not the way it works. Codes are more prescriptive than that. You are limited by smaller areas in the building generally speaking. Also it´s not just power density now. LEED ties you to a standard called ASHRAE. And ASHRAE has other limitations such as exterior lighting power densities per square meter. But I would not say I feel limited by the energy code. Very rarely are we really stuck with not enough power. As the fixtures get more efficient this power problem becomes more manageable. That is not to say you can go to zero with power. But so far I think we have managed it pretty well.

What makes you really angry?
Badly made fixtures that fail. Because it costs everybody time and money and it is embarrassing and we all look stupid. That`s the biggest problem: The unexpected and catastrophic failure of light fixtures.

There are thousands of products from thousands of manufactures you can choose from. You should be pretty happy regards quality and availability, shouldn`t you? Are you happy?
Sadly, we`re seldom happy. I don`t know that much about the commercial deployment of financial capital to make light fixtures. I really don`t. But I think supply chain issues and the commercial labyrinth of how light fixtures are purchased and delivered seems to me very mysterious. And also it is changing so fast that it must be difficult for any manufacturer to keep up. So if you put all that together you can unterstand why we are so often unhappy.
There aren`t that many good fixtures and it is hard to find them and it is even harder to get them on your project. That`s just the way it goes.

How important are custom made product solutions or modifications to your work? And if they are: Are clients prepared to pay more for this?
They always want to pay less. No one wants to hear the truth that on every project some percentage of the fixtures have never really been made before. They are custom to some extent. Many times the architects and owners have trouble understanding that and trouble believing it, meanwhile they are designing a custom solution on every single building. But they want the fixtures to be standard. If you have a single owner or owner occupied project you are more likely to be in what we all call project work. In that case there is more custom. On the other hand I try to explain to everyone - in our studio, to our clients - that everything in the catalogue is made once for the first time and on that day it was custom. The bad news is just because it is in the catalogue does not mean they have made it since, they have only made it once. Being able to specify what you want is more important than worrying about whether it is custom. >

“In architectural lighting you can see mistakes for years. So you better get it right the first time.”

What is it about FMS? How do you keep having all these nice projects every year?
It was founded by Jules (Fisher) and Paul (Marantz) and they still come to the studio daily and are working hard. We have six studio groups and four of them are headed by Principals, and two of them by very talented younger designers with 8 and 12 years of experience. I have a very “deep bench” in the studio. What happens now when we are working on a project is: They already know the answers. They are telling me the answers before we even have finished the conversation. We have become a very special organization since our founding in 1970 in the basement of Jules Fisher. Here we are fortysome years later.
Now we are in second generation becoming third generation of designers. There is this wonderful sort of ball of knowledge and experience that`s rolling forward. When people bring us a design problem we can gather a hundred years of experience around the table just by calling some people over to talk.

There is this tremendous legacy of information and knowledge, and a way of practicing which is very collaborative and inclusive of the younger ideas, which usually are the same as the older ideas. They just don`t know it yet. I may be the spokesman today but there isn`t any thing special about what I know compared to the incredible talent in our studio. That`s an important point. I don`t think I am the best designer. This is not a single artist kind of profession. To do big architectural projects the lighting is so complicated that you need a team of lighting designers to work very hard on it. It`s not one person. I see it every day in the studio. They have the better ideas. They are the ones digging, researching and sketching. They are the ones coming up with the ideas and making the specification - and the magic.

Changing the subject completely: When you are not working on projects, holding lectures, discussing about light and lighting: Are there any passions beside business?
I am walking, swimming, taking pictures and I like to travel especially with my wife and twin daughters. My parents are living well and they still travel, so I think my love of travel is genetic. If I have a hobby, believe it or not it is probably travel. It´s about 50 percent of my time that I am travelling.

What else do you like to do?
One other thing: I talk to my staff about this and I think about how it relates to our work. That is: We all use these computers, so many screens, everything is so fast, so much software. But when you are with the client you have your pencil and some paper, and you must be able to draw. Actually it doesn`t have to be that you draw well, it´s that you are not afraid to draw. I am not afraid to draw. So one of the things that happens when I am with the pencil and the client is that we work it out - on a sheet of paper. Because sitting and drawing something - I should disclose that my wife teaches drawing - you need time to sit and think about it and just look at it and you drift off to another kind of state of mind.
One of the things that doesn`t change, that has not changed in all the years I have been doing this and it is not going to change, I think very easily: You have to design with a pencil in your hand. <<