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PEOPLE

Spotlight on founder of Cinimod Studios and the man behind Snog, Dominic Harris

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THE DOMINIC EFFECT

The founder of Cinimod Studios, Dominic Harris discusses his passion for the industry, career and recent exciting projects



If you've visited a Snog restaurant, you won't need me to tell you how talented Dominic Harris is. A leader in British interactive lighting design, Harris is the man behind some of the quirkiest lighting installations of this decade.

HL: What sparked your passion for architecture and lighting design?

Great lighting is essential to make great architecture, and I have always striven

Cinimod Studio-Snog Covent Garden

to combine the two seamlessly. I have a strong interest in film and theatre, but from a somewhat curious perspective. When I was young, I would go to the theatre and be mesmerised by the mechanics of constructing a stage set and visual illusion. There was magic in the way super-controlled lighting and physical constructs were inseparable, and I think this fascination became an underlying subconscious agenda I would

later follow in my career.

HL: Where, and what did you study?

I qualified as an architect at Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. The course there was ambitious, and I was taught by Professor Stephen Gage in a unit titled, 'The Interactive Workshop.' Lessons learned here, of course included design and technology, but probably most important were the life lessons about

having attitude and ambition in design.

HL: What was your first step on the career ladder in design?

I've been extremely fortunate to work with some of the best design studios. This included four years as an architect with Future Systems, where I worked closely with the late Jan Kaplicky whose words of wisdom and scepticism still resonate in my mind. I then worked for Softroom Architects on the Virgin Upper Class lounge, where I soon realised that I was spending most of my time working on intricate ceiling and lighting details. From there I worked for the Jason Bruges studio for three years before founding Cinimod Studio in 2007.

HL: Why did you decide to go it alone and create Cinimod Studio?

In addition to being an obsessive designer, I am also an entrepreneur. Founding my own design studio was always an inevitable next step, and when the time came I received encouragement and support from Jason and his studio, for which I am still grateful.

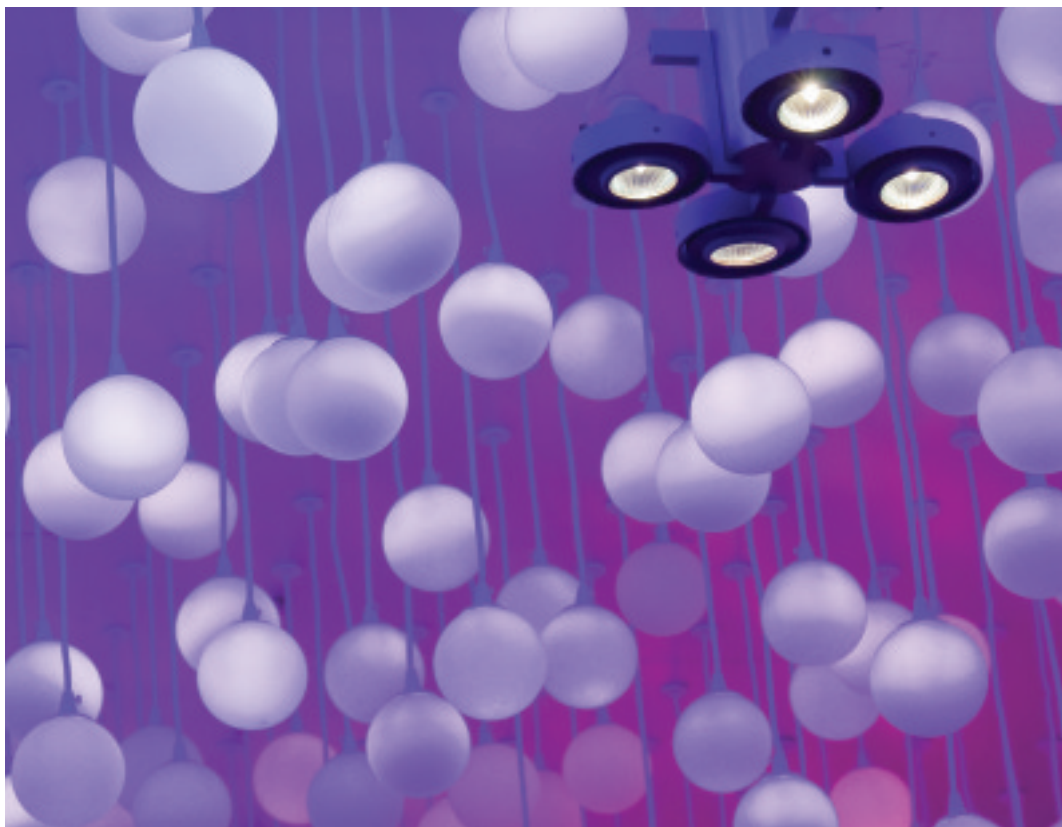
HL: How did you come up with the name?

Hah, very few people ask that! It was important that the studio was not just about me. Even when I set up alone I knew I would need the skills of other talented designers. So I adopted the name Cinimod, which is Dominic backwards. My sister all her life has called me Cinimod, but it wasn't until my wife saw me floundering on selecting a name that she proposed Cinimod for my practice and it just felt right.

HL: When the company first launched, how did you decide which areas of design to focus on?

I founded my studio without having a single client. My first task, as is the case for nearly all start-ups, was to create the identity. As the name Cinimod Studio itself was descriptive I added the words, Interactive Lighting, Architecture & Art to my business card. To my own amazement, the jobs I started winning all captured at least three or even four of these disciplines. It's now a requirement for all projects I undertake that at least three of these disciplines are incorporated.

“ GREAT LIGHTING IS ESSENTIAL TO MAKE GREAT ARCHITECTURE ”



HL: Some of your recent projects use interactive technology. What is the inspiration behind this?

Much of our work is interactive, which is a whole new art form that combines science and technology with human and environmental interaction. Bringing the spectator into a project in a way that becomes an active part of the artwork will fundamentally change a project. The interaction leads to new and unexpected behaviours, and for me there is a real passion and reward in seeing the users of an artwork become entangled and immersed.

HL: How can it best be used?

For the interactive projects and artworks to work, the interaction needs to be natural and part of the original concept. It can't just be an add-on.

HL: How does Cinimod Studio stay one step ahead of its competition?

I look to the future for our technologies, the present for our audience, and the past for cultural richness.

HL: What was the first project you worked on?

One of the first projects I undertook as Cinimod was the lighting design for an exclusive birthday party for a city banker who had flown in his favourite band, The Dandy Warhols to perform for him.

HL: What has been your favourite project, and why?

Our work for Snog Pure Frozen Yogurt was one of my first projects within the studio. Each store is still an exciting experimentation in architectural and lighting design. The first store appeared to many as an expensive pilot that was unsustainable to develop. However with the passing of time, and the increased number of locations we are opening, it's satisfying to see that our store designs, complete with their lighting installations, are gaining worldwide reputation, further helping to develop our clients' brands and ultimately their businesses. It was on this strength that subsequent commissions from such retail luminaires as Julian Metcalfe



(Pret a Manger and Itsu) originated.

HL: And the most unusual?

We built and flew a UFO – for real! Designed and built for New York artist, Peter Coffin, we created a seven-metre diameter structure that was laden with 3,500 controllable lights and then flown on a single strop line under a helicopter. We flew it over the beaches of Rio De Janeiro, Brazil. An estimated 500,000 people gathered on the beaches to watch this strange high-altitude art performance. It was a hugely ambitious project to realise but we did succeed, and met the primary project goal - the flight of a large UFO over a major metropolitan area.

HL: What's been the most ambitious?

We recently completed the design and implementation of an interactive lighting system for Peru's national stadium. The challenges were immense and the timescale short. We wanted to create the world's largest crowd controlled lighting system so that the external façade of the stadium could show the passion, excitement and at times, disappointment of the crowds. We designed and deployed a custom software and hardware system that captured the collective mood of the spectators and translated them into lighting patterns.

HL: The Snog Pure Frozen Yogurt restaurants are visually stunning spaces. How did you come up with the concept?

I have a history of working with bold colour and forms. With the Snog stores, I was obviously drawing on my previous experience, but probably equally importantly I was also looking to the frozen yogurt itself, the cheeky name 'Snog', and the overall branding

developed by Ico Design.

The original architectural design concept we created for Snog evolved around the idea of a perpetual British summer - hence the grass floors, floral graphics and digital sky ceilings. In our design studio, we've recently been using generative and parametric design tools to assist us in our pursuit of fluid and sensual forms, and at the recent Chelsea location we used this arsenal of tools to full effect to create a seemingly infinitely curving and undulating canopy of sky ribbons.

HL: Would you consider yourself primarily an artist, designer or architect?

I am an artist, trained as an architect. My chosen palette of materials is form, light, and technology.

HL: Has the change in technology since you started designing affected the way you work?

By definition, technology itself is always progressing. What has changed is something more personal; my own attitude towards how we use new technologies. Never should technology dominate over concept and design.

HL: What area within the hospitality sector do you prefer to design for?

I would like to take on more large-scale projects. Between flying UFOs, delivering 30m tall chandeliers, and using the crowd within a football stadium to control a façade, I believe we've proven we have the skills to deliver ambitious and large projects. This is what we would like to be doing more of in the future.

HL: Your installations are often very colourful. Do you think this is something that more designers should consider?

My preferred palette of architectural

materials is generally comprised of materials and finishes that work well with curves and can be formed seamlessly in three dimensions. However my main tool, which I use on all projects, is light. It's really important to me that the lighting design is integrated as part of the conceptual design process. I find it a great pity and lost opportunity that the lighting in architecture is all too often treated as an afterthought.

HL: Are there any designers you particularly admire?

My all time favourite architect, for whom I had the great pleasure and honour to work for, is the late Jan Kaplicky of Future Systems. He was a true visionary and in my projects I still hear and see the echoes of advice he gave me.

HL: What's your favourite thing about the job?

The best thing about my job is the moment of reveal when the viewer, the client or the public finally sees and understands what we have been labouring away at. When, in their first reaction, I can see they are engaged and delighted, then I know I've done the job well.

HL: Finally, what does design excellence mean to you?

Design excellence is about pushing the envelope of design to achieve results that are simultaneously unbelievable yet also incredibly natural and fitting. It is equally about the physical result rather than just the design process. It is about delivering a project that both excites and inspires. **hl**

Snog's stunning lighting scheme