

| November 4, 2016

# Ask The Expert: Michiru Tanaka



*Grand Central Terminal, NYC | Photograph by Alessandra Divizia*

**M**ichiru Tanaka began her lighting career as a designer at Illumination of City Environment Inc. (ICE), in Tokyo, working on retail and residential assignments, as well as hospitality projects, ranging from a resort in the Japanese Alps to the Park Hyatt in Seoul.

A move to New York brought her to renowned lighting design studio Cooley Monato, where she worked on projects for Tiffany's and Gucci, and then on to a more technical consulting position with Toshiba, where she helped develop the concept of LEDs as exhibit

lighting for the Smithsonian Institution's Freer and Sackler galleries and the Japan Gallery at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts. Returning to design, she put her experience to work designing projects for Fendi and Goldman Sachs at the international, award-winning firm L'Observatoire.

Tanaka's recent collaboration with Kaneka represents the boundaries of design and technology she has pushed throughout her career. Her product design acumen has been finely matched with the emerging technology of Kaneka's OLEDs. Tanaka will collaborate with Kaneka OLED in the spring of 2017 on a new OLED fixture collection, following the global launch of Kaneka OLED at the Museum of Arts and Design in November 2016. She is committed to the goal of using sustainable, energy-efficient lighting design solutions in all her projects.



*"Communication is always key to a project's success – it's everything. My task is to communicate the theme of a project with light."*

## Q&A

Q | *How would you describe your lighting philosophy?*

**A | I think of lighting like the spices that are added to the dish of a design. I also think my design philosophy comes from my roots in Japan. I grew up with the Japanese concept called “praise of shadows,” which essentially means that darkness emphasizes the light.**

**I like creating the contrast of light and shadow. I like to respect the client’s ideas as well as the conceptual design and I enjoy the collaborative process a lot – working together with everyone involved on the project.**

Q | *How do you incorporate color into a lighting design?*

**A | Color in lighting is actually very hard to deal with. When we choose a lighting color for a space, it has to be for a reason. It has to be considerate of the space design.**

**People have very personal responses to colors. For instance, red feels passionate, blue feels cold or cool, and purple feels intimate. I choose colors very carefully to match the desired atmosphere and I like mixing colors to create something with more depth.**

Q | *What was it like to see your work on display in the iconic Grand Central Terminal, during Holiday 2013? Did you know right away what you would do for the display?*

**A | Since the light show was for both the 100-year anniversary of Grand Central Terminal and the holiday season, I decided to make it very playful, with a holiday theme. There were three versions of abstract moving images: “Metro North trains,” “Fall (Thanksgiving),” and “Winter (Christmas).” I decided on the speed of the movement by considering the speed of people walking by. There are thousands of people passing through the space every day; I wanted to add a festive feeling, even for those who were rushing through the terminal.**

Q | *What is it like teaching lighting design to the students of the Interior Design department at FIT?*

**A | I started last year, and it’s been a very enjoyable experience to see young designers getting to know the industry and community. I always tell students to imagine they’re in a real working environment and I could be their client when they present their ideas. I also take my students to lighting showrooms and completed projects, so they can experience lighting, not just see it in pictures. The class should be practical.**

Q | *Do you have a dream project/place/subject you would like to light?*

A | **I do have a specific idea for an installation I'd love to develop next, perhaps in Bryant Park or Central Park, where there are lots of trees that are seen from all angles. My vision is to create a play of light against the trees and a play of shadows against the city. I always love the magic of natural objects and my design would emphasize the beauty of combining nature and light.**

Q | *What are some of the technical advancements in the lighting industry that are making your job easier and/or more creatively possible?*

A | **Utilizing LED light sources is a big advantage and a challenge at the same time. Today, LED lights are very advanced compared to six to ten years ago, not only in terms of energy efficiency, but also the size of the products and flexibility on color temperatures, all of which make lighting design more sophisticated. We used to need three colors of fluorescent tubes or neon to create the mixed colors we wanted. Now RGBW (red, green, blue, white) LED fixtures can achieve the same effect but with much more output control.**



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*Exterior lighting for a corporate event at the Smithsonian Institution's Freer and Sackler Galleries | Washington, DC*

# DIFFERENT SPACES | DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS

**RESIDENTIAL VS.COMMERCIAL** | When I work on a residence, I get to know the client's life patterns very well. The process is very different from commercial projects because it's strictly personal. I explain to the client every reason why the lighting should be as I've designed.

When I work on a commercial space, the people I present my design to are either managing or designing the whole project and have an understanding of the design features and full picture of the project. For commercial projects, sustainability and energy efficiency are as important as the design. Energy codes are getting much stricter and it's a challenge to create the proper environment with limited energy allowances.

**HOTELS** | I really enjoy working on hotel projects because one building contains all aspects of how people live – eating, sleeping, entertaining, working, exercising, and relaxing.

When I design hotel lighting, it's very important to understand what the features of the hotel will be: classic, midcentury, playful, modern, rustic, eco-friendly, industrial and so on. Sometimes the hotel carries its own luxury branding, so we'll make sure the lighting matches that luxury aesthetic.

When we're finalizing a hotel project, we stay in a room that won't be open for weeks, adjusting light angles and dimming combinations over the day and night. Hotels operate 24 hours a day, so the lighting scenes need to be appropriate not only throughout the day but through four seasons as well.

**MUSEUMS & GALLERIES** | For museum projects, my main focus is how to light the art objects. The audience's attention should always be drawn to the objects.

Some works of art, like paintings, need very uniform and diffused lighting; stone sculpture needs multiple accent lights from different directions to create contrast; jewelry and metals need high intensity point sources. All the while, we're carefully measuring the light levels to protect other artwork in the space.