The two grand gallery

The miniscule lighting budget for this London art gallery meant that visits to Ryness and B&Q, not internationally renowned luminaire designers, were the order of the day. Notorious skinflint **Richard Simmonds** approves...

Time and money are two things that lighting designers are always short of. Sometimes, however, the two commodities are almost non-existent. East Central – an art gallery in London – is a case in point.

The venue consists of two spaces: a small reception area and gallery at street level and the main gallery on the lower ground floor. Both have bare concrete ceilings and wooden floors that are stained black. Limited daylight meant that artificial lighting was vital to the project, but by the time Inverse Lighting Design was brought on board, the budget left for design and equipment was miniscule.

Filip Vermeiren of Inverse sets the scene: "We were in contact with the owner a few years ago about a different gallery, but that fell through. Then he acquired this new space and we spoke about it. Again, it went quiet and then suddenly the gallery was going to open in two weeks and there was almost no budget left for the lighting."

Meetings with the architect and the client were hastily arranged. Vermeiren says they discussed how the lighting had to be flexible, but explained that there was no budget and that all the fittings would have to be off the shelf products.

In detail A detail view of the visible wiring system with directional lampholders attached to the concrete ceiling with bent aluminium rods

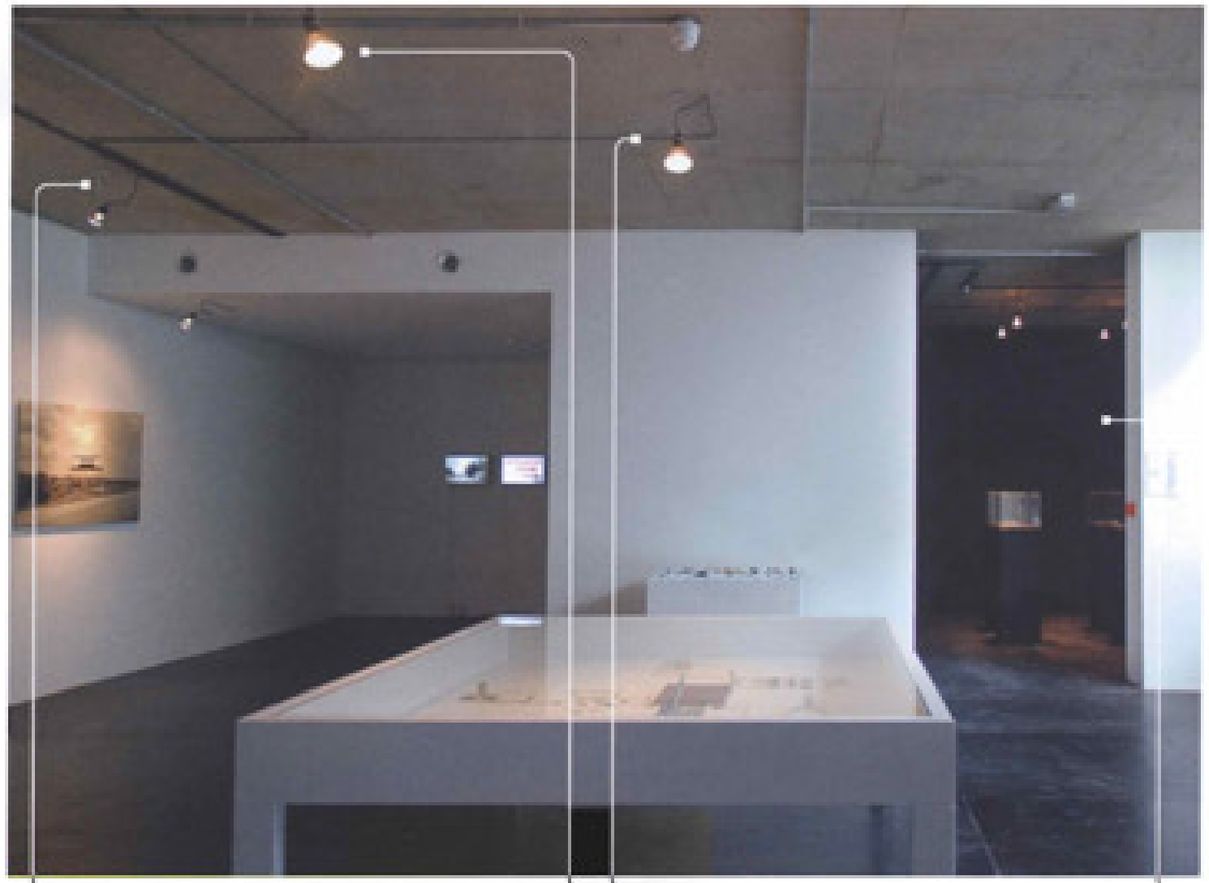
"I thought: 'Okay, so they don't have £50,000 for a track system.' Then I realised that in fact they had less than £2,000 to spend."

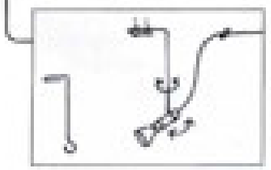
Any remaining aspirations to use track lighting were dealt a final blow when discussions with the architect revealed that rough concrete finishes were prominent throughout the gallery. Vermeiren felt that track would have been out of place in such an environment.

Architect's ideas

However, architect Alun Jones did have some lighting ideas of his own. He had been responsible for the Garden Museum in a church near Lambeth Bridge, and there he had used lamps in bare sockets, hanging from the ceiling by their

> "IT'S ONE OF THE FEW PROJECTS WHERE THE CONSTRAINTS SEEMED TO HELP"
> **FILIP VERMEIREN, INVERSE LIGHTING DESIGN**



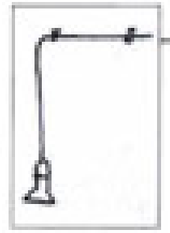


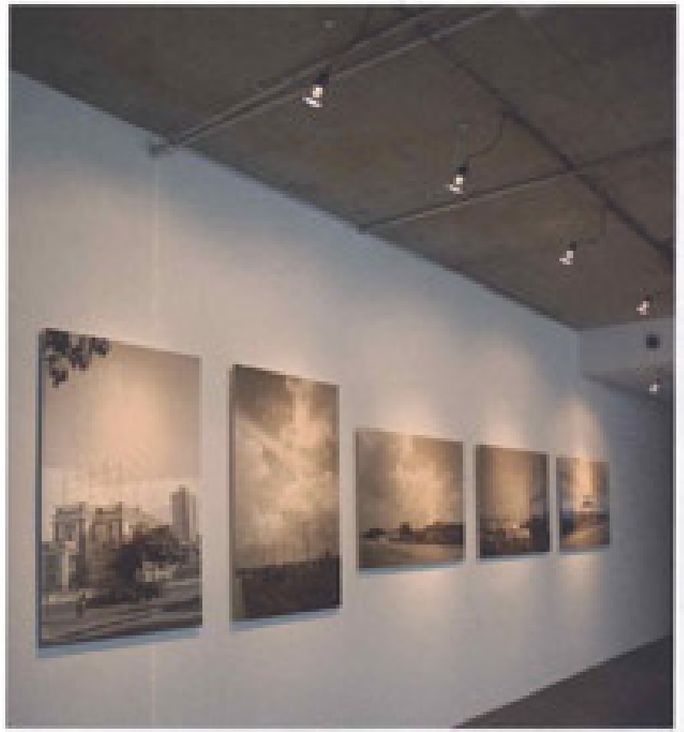
01 Aluminium rods procured from B&Q let the lighting designers direct the lamps at wall-mounted artwork throughout the gallery. The rods are simply bent around the lampholders and fixed to the ceiling with a bolt and a washer

03 Cable runs are fixed to the bare concrete ceiling with cable ties and self-adhesive pads of the kind used by electricians. Although this system is infinitely flexible, more permanent ceiling hardware may be installed in the future.

02 PAR 20 sources in E27 lampholders are used in most areas, although CFL sources are fitted in the entrance area, where they produce a softer, diffused light. Black and brass lampholders were procured from high street electrical stores.

04 Display cases that do not need a directed light source are illuminated by lampholders that simply hang from the ceiling on their electrical cables. The final self-adhesive pad in the run is drilled into the ceiling for security





Flexible fittings Lampholders suspended by aluminium rods can be aimed at artworks on the wall, but lamps simply hang above display cases

cables. He suggested that a similar approach to the gallery might help alleviate both financial and time pressures.

There was one complication, however. "For this project," says Vermeiren, "the lights couldn't just hang down from the ceiling, you had to aim them onto paintings."

After rejecting a number of elaborate ideas, including knuckle joints and metal straps, the designers hit on the idea of simply suspending PAR20 lamps in E27 lampholders with an aluminium rod – one that could be bent to direct the light at the paintings. "Each rod is bent like a paper clip," says Vermeiren, "secured to the ceiling with a screw and a large washer. The lampholder has two threads, normally used to secure a shade, so the rod is bent around the lampholder and two nuts hold it in place."

The lengths of the rods varies. Upstairs, the ceiling height is low, so the rods are short. Downstairs, they drop about 200mm from the ceiling. Each rod is 4mm in diameter. They are easy to bend, and can be clipped to length with pliers.

Off the shelf

Time and money were in short supply, so a few trips to local B&Q DIY stores yielded the necessary metalwork. Similarly, lampholders were bought at branches of the Ryness electrical chain. "The most traumatic experience was finding simple black lampholders," says Vermeiren. "We roamed Ryness stores in London to buy up all the ones we needed."

With the lamps supported and targeting the artworks, there was the matter of the cabling to the improvised fittings. Fortunately, the installation was not supposed to be permanent. Vermeiren says: "Part of the deal was – given the short timescale – that we would do the installation for the first exhibition rather than trying to come up with a system that would carry them through forever."

The approach chosen was to attach electricians' sticky pads to the ceiling and use cable ties to secure the cables in straight lines. Typical spacing between the pads was 300mm. For future exhibitions, says Vermeiren, the client can hang the cables and spots wherever they are needed.

There are black and orange cables in the installation, an aesthetic choice that was born of practicality. "We couldn't get enough black lampholders, so we got some copper brass ones for the non-exhibition areas and used orange cable to match," says Vermeiren. The brass lampholders and orange cables are fitted in the reception area, which doubled as a bar for the gallery opening.

Soft glow for reception

Another difference in the reception area is the light source used. Mains voltage PAR lamps are used throughout the project, but compact fluorescent sources are installed at the entrance to give a soft glow.

"Four years ago, the E27 lampholder could only accept mains voltage PAR lamps," says Vermeiren. "Now there are quite a few compact fluorescent lamps with a diffused, soft light, and there are LEDs from Megaman."

Clever though the scheme is, there are some disadvantages to the minimalist approach. "The client likes the look of the installation, but would like it to be more flexible," says Vermeiren. "He doesn't want to have to take all the sticky pads down and put new ones up. So we're planning to have a metal strip mounted permanently on the ceiling for mounting the cable ties."

With the project completed in time for the first exhibition, how does Vermeiren feel about the result? "Often, although you don't want a project with these kinds of constraints, it turns out well in the end," he says. "The space doesn't feel like there was no budget – it looks good, I think." ■

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KEEPING CONTROLS SIMPLE

In keeping with the remainder of the installation, controls for the East Central gallery are simple. There are a number of lighting circuits, and each is equipped with dimmer switches.

There were concerns that dimming the compact fluorescent sources at the gallery entrance would be difficult. "When you dim CFLs, you often get a greyish, flat light," says Filip Vermeiren of Inverse Lighting Design. "But we were surprised that the compact fluorescents worked well on the dimmers, even when you mixed them with tungsten."

Hang 'em high The low ceiling height of the ground floor gallery space meant the lampholders could be suspended on short aluminium rods, in the downstairs gallery, however, they hang about 200mm from the ceiling

Different approaches Bent aluminium rods allow the plain black lampholders to be aimed at artworks – a number of other designs were considered and rejected

Photos: Filip Vermeiren

PROJECT DETAILS
PROJECT: EAST CENTRAL GALLERY, LONDON EC2
LIGHTING DESIGNERS: FILIP VERMEIREN, NALAT PORN SAKDIRIT, ONUR **SUNGUROGLU,** INVERSE LIGHTING DESIGN
ARCHITECT: ALUN JONES