

Carolina Florian – Presidential Address

14 May 2026, CIBSE, London



Good evening and welcome, Past Presidents, Members, Honoured guests, Peers, Friends, and Family. It is both an honour and a privilege to represent the Society as your President for the coming year.

There are many people I would like to thank for helping me reach this point, but first, I want to thank my husband, Andres, your support and companionship over the past 25 years have kept me grounded throughout the journey. My thanks also go to peers, mentors and collaborators from many organisations, some of which made it here today. Also, a huge thank you to all the Past Presidents for their amazing work and dedication to the Society. And a special thank you to Kristina for handing over the SLL in such high spirits with the outcomes of the 'Get Curious' initiative, which will continue for years to come. Finally, the Society owes an awful lot to the dedicated professionals behind us within CIBSE and the SLL family. Special thanks to Brendan Keely, the secretary of the SLL and Fiona Fanning our SLL Senior Membership Executive.

Light with Intention

The best lighting is the kind no one notices – purposeful, human, inclusive.

This presidency will be the same: global in reach, grounded in people, and persistent about why our work matters.

In Bogotá, in the afternoon, the light does something. I grew up inside it without quite understanding why – the specific warmth of a late afternoon at high altitude, the way it falls through open courtyards, the way the mountains hold the horizon differently there than anywhere else I have lived since.

I have been in the UK for over twenty years. I arrived with an engineering background and a curiosity about a profession I had not yet found. There was a period of recalibration. A new culture. A new language. Even a new sky to read. But those years were not about leaving something behind. They were about adding to it. I am not less Colombian for having lived here. I am a combination of two very different places, which means more ways of reading a space, and more ways of asking what light is doing within it.

The project that made me understand what this profession could be was not a glamorous one, at least not from the outside. Early in my career I was part of the ATKINS team working on Crossrail, alongside ARUP and many other outstanding consultancy and architectural firms. Then, after my MSc in Light & Lighting at UCL, I joined the Equation team working on the Elizabeth Line-wide design for Crossrail – Europe's largest infrastructure project. Millions of people move through those spaces every year, and they feel something. They feel that the space is coherent, that it is calm, that it is easy to navigate. They feel oriented, without knowing why. As Keith Miller, our director at the time would say: "Warm light in the spaces where they wait. Cooler, crisper light in the passages where they move". The logic of human experience embedded in the architecture.

I spent nearly a decade on that project wearing different hats, from client facing based at Canary Wharf to witnessing full size mock-ups and arguing about procurement decisions on site, and always trying to provide the best professional neutral advice I could. But when it opened in May 2022, our ambition was simple: that nobody would notice the lighting at all. Not because it did not

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matter. But because it mattered so much it became ‘invisible’. As a Londoner commuting on the Elizabeth Line regularly and seeing how it improves people’s life, I came to understand, that this is what good lighting is.

I could have stayed in infrastructure and Buildings. Instead, I moved toward city-scale, master planning, placemaking – eventually through my role as Regional Head of Lighting in Buro Happold, I started focusing more on international work, to the kind of projects where lighting is not applied to an experience but is constitutive of it. And then to Qiddiya, in Saudi Arabia, where I now sit on the other side of the brief entirely. Every step was a pivot – not away from something, but toward greater reach. Toward greater influence on how fundamental Daylight and artificial Lighting are in enabling people live and move through the world.

I stand here today as the incoming President of the Society of Light and Lighting – and I am aware that I may be the first person in this role to have grown up outside the UK and Europe. I hold that with gratitude, and with the responsibility to use that different perspective.

What this moment asks of us

I have said many times – in articles, in lectures, in conversations with clients who do not quite understand who/ what they are hiring – that great lighting is the kind no one notices. I borrowed it, loosely, from Coco Chanel, who said: “Dress shabbily and they remember the dress; dress impeccably and they remember the woman”. It emphasizes that elegant, well-fitted designs make the wearer memorable, while poor dressing makes only the outfit stand out. In our case, if you notice or feel annoyed by the lights, we have not done our job well.

But we have allowed ourselves to be taken as a ‘nice to have’ service, not just in design, but in most conversations around the built environment. That the discipline which shapes how every human being experiences every built space they inhabit has permitted itself to be brought in late, consulted lightly, and credited rarely. Most clients have opinions about lighting without understanding it well. Many architects make decisions about it without our input. Government sets policy influencing it without our expertise in the room. The public lives inside it without knowing how to get proper advice, especially when it is already affecting people’s health, physically and/or psychologically.

That is a communication shortfall. And it is ours to fix.

What I want this year to be is not complicated, but it is demanding. I want us to make this profession more visible to the people who should value it. I want the SLL to be more present in all the regions – not just in London, not just in the UK and Ireland, but in other regions where ambitious work is being designed in light. And I want us to better reflect the people who work in light and lighting – embracing the full range of backgrounds, pathways, roles, and perspectives within our discipline, while celebrating and communicating the depth of our collective expertise.

Strengthening the profession

Lighting designers are brought in too late. We have said it for years – and it is still happening. We are treated as specifiers when we should be creating experiences. We are called when the architecture is fixed, the budget is defined, and decision-makers want quick results.

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This is backwards. Light does not illuminate a space – light shapes the experience. It shapes perception, supports wellbeing, enables safety and socio-economic activation. It belongs at the beginning and every step of the process. And as long as we allow ourselves to be positioned otherwise, we are not only undervalued – we are underperforming on behalf of the people who will live and work in the spaces we help create.

The case to our collaborators – To our colleagues in architecture and engineering, the case is simple: lighting design is not a finish. It is not a fixture. It is infrastructure for human experience. If you want to understand what that means in practice, stand on an Elizabeth line platform and notice that you feel calm. You do not know why. You do not think about it. The space works, and you move through it with ease. That is the product of many years of design decisions made early, embedded in the architecture. That logic applies to every home, every school, every office, every public space we build together.

The case to government – To government, the case is different in form but equally urgent. Light pollution affects our health and the Environment. Topics like Dark skies matter. Energy efficiency matters. Inclusive Lighting is not a niche concern – it serves us all and it enables a significant proportion of every population in every city. These are policy areas. And the SLL community (and our partnerships with other institutions and academia) has technical expertise that should be at the forefront of informing these policies.

We shall aim to be more present in planning consultations, in government advisory processes, in the public submissions that shape how our cities are built because we belong in these conversations.

The case to the public – this is perhaps the longest game, but it may matter most.

We shape how the built world feels – and most people cannot name what we do. That is a communication gap. And the SLL has a role in closing it – through education, through public-facing work, through raising the conversation above the level of trade publications and into the places where the public is. My own teaching at UCL and in postgraduate courses in Colombia is one version of this: if you help shaping how students understand light, you eventually influence how practitioners will design it more consciously, and then how clients and project managers would think about it more proactively, and then – slowly, cumulatively – the public will value our positive impact more.

Commitment

This year, I intend to work with all our Committees to develop a coordinated advocacy initiative – whether that takes the form of a public outreach programme, or a structured engagement with other Lighting leaders and the wider Construction industry. The shape of it will be determined together.

My intention is firm: by the end of this presidential year, the case for good lighting design should be better understood, and better heard, than it was at the beginning of it.

Expanding global reach

Let me be clear: global expansion is not an ambition. It is already happening. Many of us are currently working on major projects internationally, in places like UAE, Saudi Arabia and across the MENA region – where some of the most ambitious urban design projects on earth are happening.

In January, I had the privilege of judging the Light Middle East Awards in Dubai, and it was invaluable to meet members of the SLL and CIBSE community in the UAE and gain a deeper understanding of the region from their perspective.

Over the coming year, I hope to visit as many of our regions as possible to support and celebrate the exceptional work being carried out by SLL and CIBSE representatives around the world. When I speak about making this Society more global, I am not describing a vision. I am describing a direction we are already moving in, and that I believe this organisation should put more energy into.

Deepening what we have

The SLL now has representatives in the MENA region, Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand. I am glad they exist. I want them to mean more than they currently do. Our community is growing there. The regions are curious about raising their own standards, being connected practitioners, and accessing the expertise and knowledge that the SLL has spent decades developing. I want to make that real.

We also look forward to having SLL representatives joining us in Saudi Arabia in the coming year. Projects such as Expo 2030, Qiddiya, Diriyah, Sports Boulevard, Al-Ula, Red Sea, etc. are among the most ambitious lighting briefs being written anywhere in the world right now. And practitioners like me working on these sites – some of whom are SLL members, many of whom trained in this country – are doing outstanding work without a well-developed professional Lighting institution that reflects where we are and better supports the development of the Lighting profession locally for the benefit of these communities.

The principle

I want to say that this is not just about membership numbers. It is about something more important: ensuring that wherever significant work is happening – wherever people are making decisions about light in the built environment – there is a professional community present to raise the standard of those decisions, to share knowledge, to protect design integrity, and to remind practitioners that they belong to something larger than the isolated projects they are currently on. Light is universal. The profession should be too.

Diversity as design intelligence

Today, I want to make a case for diversity: better perspectives lead to better design. It is not about representation for its own sake – though representation matters – but, if the built environment serves everyone, the teams who design it should reflect the full range of people who live in it.

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And I want to extend it: diversity is not only about where you come from. It is also about where you have stood. About what roles you have inhabited, what vantage points you have occupied, what parts of the process you have seen from the inside. The profession benefits from people who came in sideways – who bring knowledge from adjacent disciplines, from the other side of the table.

My own path

As many of us here today, I did not train as a lighting designer at first. I came through engineering and focused on buildings. I moved into infrastructure. I shifted toward urban design, master planning, placemaking and human experience. Each of those pivots felt, at the time, like a departure from a straight line. I understand now that they were the making of whatever I have become as a practitioner. The non-linear route is not a compromise. It is a different kind of mastering on your field – one that gives you tools and experiences that the direct path does not.

I am a Chartered Engineer and part of the CIBSE family since 2007 when I started my MSc at Brunel. I've been a member of the SLL for over 10 years after graduating from the MSc Light & Lighting at the Bartlett in UCL. Beyond my project's portfolio, I have also shared academia activities with other great professionals and researchers. Those experiences did not come from following a single track. They came from crossing several, and my ambition to find what connects them, what benefits us all.

The full arc of the industry

But I want to name something specific, because I think it matters for how this Society understands leadership. I have been, at different points in my career, a student, an engineer, a designer, an academic, and advisor and now a client. Every one of those positions showed me something the others did not.

As a student, I learned to ask why. As an engineer, how. As a designer, for whom. As an academic, teaching the next generations, I learned to ask what lasts – what is worth passing on, what gained understanding survives the project. As an advisor, I use my expertise on balancing all project drivers, risks, constraints and opportunities. And now, sitting on the other side of the brief at Qiddiya, as the client commissioning the work rather than delivering it, I understand something I could not have understood from any other position: how rarely we get the chance to make our value clear to the people paying for it. How rarely we communicate in a language that a client can act on. How much we assume is understood that is not.

That gap – between what lighting design is and what clients understand it to be – is one I intend to spend this year closing. It connects directly to the first pillar. The strongest advocate for the value of good lighting design in a client meeting is someone who has been the designer, the client, and the end-user. And I intend to use that for the benefit of the Lighting profession with your support and collaboration.

The goal is a profession that thinks and collaborates in more dimensions – because the challenges ahead of us require exactly that.

The cultural and gender dimension

I am Colombian. I am a woman. And I believe I am the first person to hold this presidency who is neither British nor Irish originally. I state these things not because they are the most interesting things about me, but because they are true – and because the people who might follow me deserve to know that this role is available to them, to everyone who has the passion and commitment to follow their dreams and give back to our industry. What becomes possible for the next person is shaped in part by what is visibly possible now. I am aware of that. I intend to carry it well.

The light that works is the light you trust

I want to come back to Bogotá, my hometown.

That light I described at the beginning – the warmth of a late afternoon at altitude, the shadows in the courtyard, the mountains at the edge of the sky – I understand it differently now than I did when I was a child inside it. I understand now it was not just weather. It was design. It was latitude and altitude and the materials that someone chose for those buildings, and the orientation of those streets, and the decisions of people who thought about how light would move through the spaces they were making. The light I grew up inside was designed. I just did not know it.

This is what we do. We make choices. We shape how people feel in spaces they will move through thousands of times without once stopping to ask why those spaces feel the way they do. And the measure of our success is precisely that they do not ask. That the design has done its work so completely that it has dissolved into experience. My call to all of us today is to strive for lighting that is thoughtful, purposeful, and impactful – wherever it is needed.

The SLL gave me a professional home when I needed one – and I intend to spend this year extending that home further. Into other geographies. Into new disciplines. Into the hands of people who have not yet found this profession, who do not yet know that it exists.

I aim to work with the rest of the SLL Executive and other Committees on the Society 5-years plan, on making more things possible for the long term, and for that I am looking forward to collaborating with the CIBSE staff, Societies, Special Interest Groups, our Sustaining Members and Regions.

Thank you for listening and please join us for refreshments to continue the conversation in the Members lounge areas outside this room.