

JOHANNES TORPE.

# mondo

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## DUTCH MASTER

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH  
ROGIER VAN DER HEIDE ON THE  
RIJKSMUSEUM RENOVATION

JOHANNES TORPE INTERVIEWED • THE ARC SHOW REVIEW  
LEO VILLAREAL PROFILE • SPEIRS + MAJOR'S 'IN LUMINE TUO'





038 DETAILS



039

*interview*

# THE BRAND MASTER

*Raised on a hippie commune in northern Denmark and instilled with a boundless creative spirit, designer Johannes Torpe has lived a life dedicated to following his passions, along the way building an international reputation for his intelligently branded interiors. Pete Brewis meets up in Milan to discuss the power of good lighting and why life for a designer truly does begin at forty...*





040 DETAILS



Opened in 1997, NASA instantly became Copenhagen's most exclusive nightclub and launched Johannes Torpe onto the international scene. His use of warm white light and inviting curves made it a much-referenced example of intelligent interior design.

Though existing outside the architectural lighting design profession in its strictest sense, the work of Johannes Torpe nonetheless incorporates a deeply rooted understanding of light. And well it might; despite only recently celebrating his 40th birthday, the Danish designer's career already spans the greater part of three decades, with illumination forming a recurring theme throughout. Based in Copenhagen, Torpe heads a multidisciplinary design studio with sister ateliers in Beijing, Hong Kong, and New York. Collectively they provide holistic design solutions for branded retail and interior spaces, interrogating each element within a scheme - from the art to the furniture and of course the illumination of the space itself. When we meet in Milan during Design Week, Torpe is surrounded by suits and speakers, the fruits of a recent project - undertaken in his new capacity as Bang & Olufsen's Creative Director at large - to bring together the worlds of textile design and high-end audio. It all seems a universe away from his

early years in North Denmark. Torpe grew up in a free-thinking hippie community in the farthest reaches of north-west Jutland. Raised by his artist mother and musician father, he began life "with a paint brush in one hand and a drumstick in the other," and while his contemporaries embarked on a 20-year stretch in the education system, Torpe was allowed to follow his passions wherever they led him. Free from the constraints of traditional expectation, he held on tight with both hands, ensuring design and music have remained as a constant, intertwining presence throughout his life. It was his parents that first presented him with the power of good lighting when, aged eight, they took him to a music festival in Jutland to see Jethro Tull play live. It proved a formative experience for the young Torpe. "From a very early age I thought lighting design was incredibly interesting because you could actually paint something straight from your imagination," he says. "You could paint with light; you

could use different layers; you could create depth. It was fantastic." When the camp hosted their own music festival a few years later, Torpe constructed his own 20-channel lighting desk using pre-packed dimmer circuit boards. "It was made of a piece of metal with a circuit board underneath it and 380V coming in, so it was like an electric chair; you could almost feel the tension in the material," he recalls. Coupled with some rudimentary PAR 64 paint cans and a small smoke machine, the system was completed, but when the visiting lighting designers saw the set-up they were less than impressed. "They were like, 'What the fuck is this shit?'" remembers Torpe. "They all gave up and let me do the lighting instead, and for age eleven I did a pretty good job with the materials we had." Aged twelve, Torpe left the camp and moved to Copenhagen where he side-stepped the standard stages of growing up and embarked on an education of experience. Avoiding school, he got a job in a

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Located in a high-end mall complex in the heart of Beijing's financial district, SUBU fuses Chinese dining with a clean Scandinavian aesthetic. In the heart of the restaurant, a series of cocoons enclose guests in their own intimate space.

drum store and through this made connections with a number of bands, gradually picking up jobs as the lighting designer for their gigs. At thirteen he was touring Scandinavia and by fourteen, he was travelling Europe. Two years later, he founded his first company, Fat Fish Lighting Design, though at just sixteen the paperwork required a signature from his, slightly bemused, mother. An artistic spirit with little interest in the machinations of business shareholdings, she quickly acquiesced and Torpe's career began in earnest. Fat Fish was soon providing all lighting design for the Roskilde Festival and later went on to create entertainment lighting design for a number of large-scale festivals across the continent. But after five years, the live touring industry began to lose its appeal. "The theatrical touring business is, first of all, incredibly hard and, secondly, very competitive, but in the wrong way; it's not a question of how talented you are, it's a question of what equipment you have to hand," he explains. According to Torpe's own mantra, "If it feels like work, you're doing it wrong." So

he sold the business, now a 15-employee strong crew, and began searching for his next challenge. Initially this took the form of graphic design work, predominantly for nightclubs, but before long his involvement had expanded into branding the spaces themselves, creating the interior design concept and, by extension, the lighting design. Such was his conviction that Torpe actually bought a 25% share in one club complex, doing so on the condition he be granted total creative control of the venue's identity. Within a year, his ideas had pulled the business out of the red to deliver a 3 million pound turnover, a success he attributes largely to a more thoughtful approach to light. "People got an experience when they entered the club. They said, 'Wow, this is beautiful!' And when something is beautiful, it creates a feeling of wellbeing, a desire to relax and have a drink. If you come into a space where you have light in your face - where you feel intimidated by the light - then it has totally the opposite effect." It was around this time that the entertainment industry began embracing LED lighting

with unfettered gusto, a culture of one-upmanship that Torpe had to work hard to counter. "People abuse the technology, in my humble opinion," he says. "Instead of looking at the beauty of, say, 3000K or 2700K lighting and using the possibilities within the range to create something where we actually look good, they think: 'Okay, now the room can be PINK. Now it's GREEN. Now it's BLUE.'" Torpe snaps his fingers to the imagined kaleidoscopic beat. "It's like a circus, but it doesn't need to be. If you do something with a relaxed atmosphere and you have confidence in what you're doing then people will love it." This philosophy of intelligently deployed white light formed the central theme of Torpe's first commercial club concept, NASA in Copenhagen. He created a soft, curved interior; a series of inviting shapes bathed entirely in subtle whites, with a touch of green on the dancefloor as his only concession to colour. The owners were initially sceptical, fearing the venue would appear stark and overly bright. The results were quite the opposite. With its glamorous, cosy





South Beauty Taipei provides guests with a visual 'story' designed to enrich the dining experience. A 1000 square metre handpainted ceiling illuminated by cove lighting while a loose-knit LED 'waterfall wall' allows guests to glimpse the plumes of fire created in the kitchen. Tables are precisely framed by halogen downlights, or closely illuminated by bespoke light pieces.

intimacy, NASA quickly became Copenhagen's hot ticket, garnering international acclaim and launching Torpe onto the international scene. In 1999, he left the nightclub industry behind to focus on product design, predominantly furniture pieces, in collaboration with the likes of Moroso, SP Haus, Hay and Haworth, and others. Global recognition has since brought with it a series of commissions to work on branded spaces around the world, allowing Torpe to draw on his thirty years of experience. "Branded spaces give you the ability to really put your thumbprint on something: to create the furniture and the lighting and the graphic design... to create the space itself," he says. He contrasts his own approach to that

of a 'typical' interior designer, someone who creates surfaces and then brings in a separate lighting design and graphic design consultant, before taking credit for the look of the entire space. "It all creates a lot of bumps in the road, whereas we just go in and do it all, with a big focus on the lighting, because it's so important," he says. Notable projects have included SUBU in 2007, a restaurant in Beijing that takes its cue from Torpes work at NASA, and Copenhagen's first cupcake bakery, Agnes Cupcakes. The latter eschews the traditional metrosexual, pastel interior in favour of a very Scandinavian, streamlined approach. Different colour temperatures are used to create a hierarchy within the space, providing depth to its simple, straight lines: 4000K on the marble backboards, 3000K

to ensure the cakes on display have an appealing glow, and 2700K within the main room of the shop to give it a welcoming, cosy feel. As a blanket policy, Torpe never includes spot or track lighting without specifying honeycombs or snoots to conceal the source, ensuring the customer's eye isn't drawn by the luminaire, but rather by the area being lit. "I try to educate the people we work with so that they look at technical lighting - retail lighting for instance or restaurant lighting - in the same way as you would theatrical lighting, in respect of false lighting coming out of the back of the fixture, or achieving the right colour rendering," Torpe says. In 2011, the Dane launched the Beijing-based Wang Torpe Studios with business



partner Wang Xiaofei, sparking a fresh influx of international attention. Among the new commissions was a project for South Beauty Restaurants creating their first venue outside mainland China. South Beauty Taipei fuses the best of traditional Chinese and Taiwanese sensibilities while fostering an elegant luxurious dining experience. "When you do a branded space, whether it's for a restaurant or a hospitality space, it's very important that you understand what the experience should be, and working with experience is something I've done my whole life," he says. In South Beauty, Torpe's aim was to create a coherent story from the moment guests enter, giving them a focus of conversation - as much an ingredient in the success of an evening as the food they are served. A hand-painted ceiling, indirectly illuminated around its edges, provides one element, views of the low-lit kitchen provide another. The preparation of Sichuan cuisine producing plumes of fire as the oils and spices are thrown around in the wok. This performance is veiled behind a loose-knit media-mesh waterfall wall. As well as cultural associations with energy flow and prosper-

ity, this combination is typical of Torpe's theatrical approach to layering a space. Illumination of the dining area is designed to be more discrete, but no less effective: halogen downlights precisely frame each table creating pockets of individual space that allows everyone - notionally at least - to enjoy the intimacy of a snug 'corner' to themselves - a prime position to observe the space's story unfold. As Torpe has discovered, creating a solid narrative for his own studio has proved equally important in garnering the acceptance of the wider design community. "It's interesting: if you go into design, and you make design your story, you discover that you're simply not taken seriously before you're 40," he says. "If you look around, here in Milan, there are a couple of exceptions, people who are only taken seriously because they're in your face all the time. But if you have a bit of dignity and use your creativity in a constructive way - building up a brand and not just doing something for the sake of it - and if you survive until you're 40, then you'll achieve success. It's a question of doing it with self-respect." [www.johannestorpe.com](http://www.johannestorpe.com)

Torpe was involved in created every aspect of the concept and experience at Agnes Cupcakes. The pastel shades seen in similar establishments are absent here, replaced by clean Scandinavian lines of bamboo and marble. Different colour temperatures of white light are used to create depth and warmth within the space.

HIGHLIGHTS

**Projects that you would like to change:** SUBU in Beijing. We used a lot of LED lighting for this project, and even though we specified of use the highest quality LED lighting the client picked a vendor producing a cheaper quality LED lights, which were not at all satisfying to the needs of the specific design. Obviously the difference can be hard to detect for most, however in this case the high quality light was necessary to capture the design of the large 'Cocoons' that made the private rooms spectacular. Through this experience I learned the value of looking into more local vendors for the lighting products, because they are trusted more by the client, and can be a better price.

**Projects you admire:** Without being too specific, I admire projects that have the ability to actually take the focus away from the lighting and put the focus on the item you have to illuminate. Creating atmosphere through light is something I value a great deal when creating Branded Spaces.

**Projects you dislike:** Beijing International Airport could benefit from an intelligent lighting design. It is done purely with general lighting. The lighting designer could have used lights to enhance the grand scale architecture. The current lighting solution takes all the effects and the depth out of the room, which I personally think is a shame. When you do large-scale projects like an airport you need to take into consideration that the lighting should add depth and air into the room. And not just cover the whole area with general lighting.

**Lighting Hero:** One of my lighting heroes is Patrick Woodroffe. Predominantly a stage-light-designer, designing for Prince and Genesis and so on, he is one of the pioneers in doing automated lighting systems for the stage.

**Notable projects:** NASA nightclub in Copenhagen, Denmark; South Beauty Group restaurant in Taipei, Taiwan; Bang & Olufsen flagship store design that my design studio have worked on for the past year. Quite early on we decided to intergrade the lighting into the design and the technology it behind, so when the speakers appear, the lights follow the sound, which gives the spectator a holistic experience.

**Most memorable project:** It has to be South Beauty Taipei, because it has so many elements of surprise for the spectator. Altogether, the light creates a great deal of the atmosphere in this specific design.

**Current projects:** We are working with a wide range of different projects internationally, everything from bedding companies to electronic companies, but also hospitality design within hotels and restaurants - as well as doing a lot of new work with fashion design companies. We have a very broad spectrum of services between our three studios.