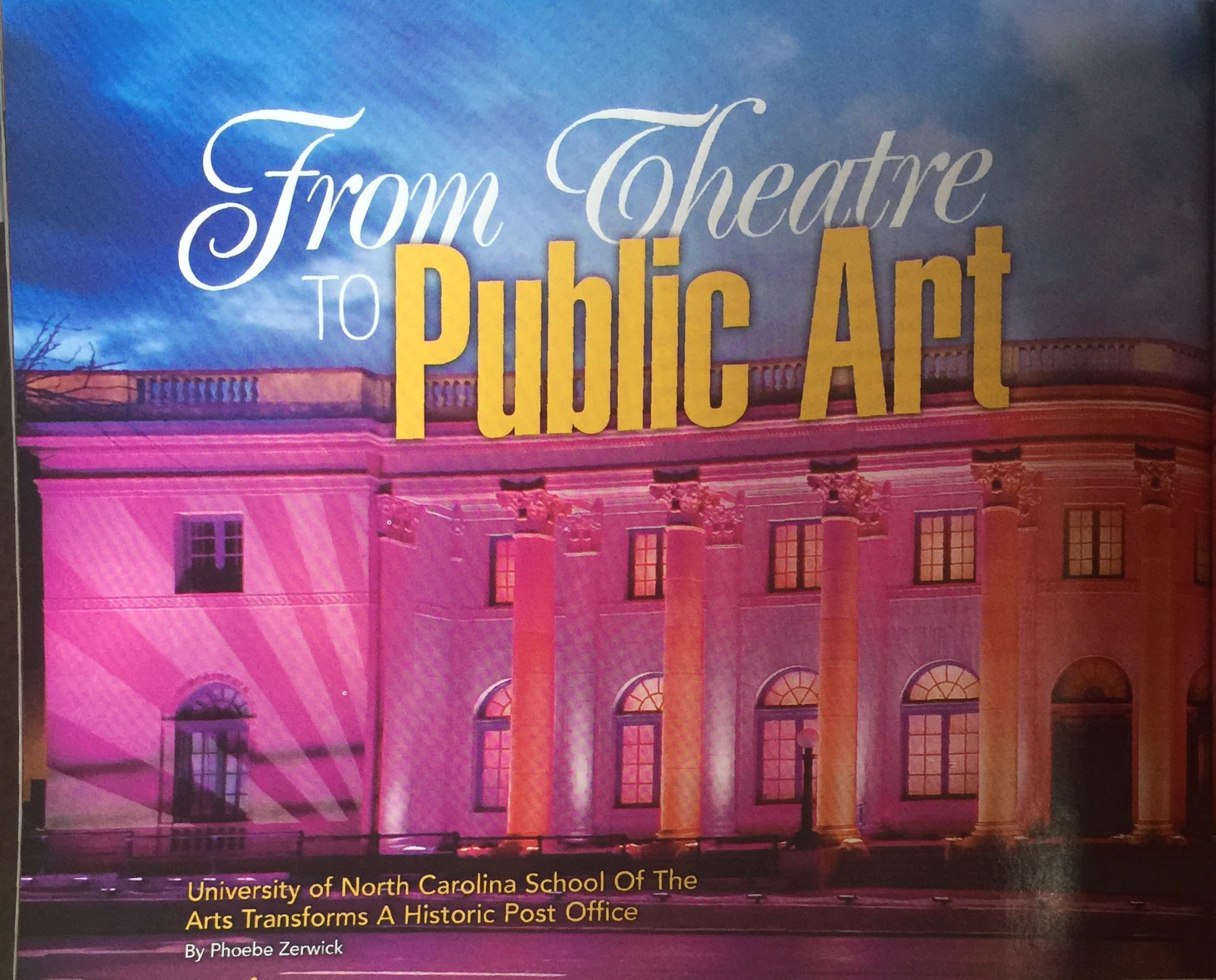
From Theatre TO Public Art



University of North Carolina School Of The Arts Transforms A Historic Post Office

By Phoebe Zerwick

The neo-classical post office building—now The Millennium Center—in downtown Winston-Salem, NC, with its Corinthian columns and arched windows, hardly looks like a blank canvas or a stage, but for three nights in November, students from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts transformed the building with colored light and projected images into a work of public art.

Using warm colors inspired by Impressionist painter Claude Monet, the students borrowed Abstract Expressionist/Minimalist Barnett Newman's palette, splashing columns with orange, blue, pink, and yellow. They also used bold graphics from pop artist Peter Max, filling the wings of the façade with projected images of sunbeams and stars. "The enormity of this project as they started doing it and the complexity of the systems they were structuring kept them excited," says Norman Coates, director of lighting for the School of the Arts. "Just the size of it, the enormity—*that* was exhilarating."

The school's lighting department trains about 35 students a year who design and light shows for the school's other performing arts departments. They light drama, opera, and dance, graduating to careers with theatres, touring shows, and lighting companies. Lighting architecture was something new to them.

Five teams of four designed the display, but in the end, every student in the department worked on setting up the show—there was no other choice. The students were also running two live productions that week and in dress rehearsals for two others, but they did have some guidance from two renowned architectural lighting designers, Paul Gregory of Focus Lighting Inc. in New York and Jonathan Speirs of Edinburgh, Scotland, who taught the students how to apply theatrical techniques to architecture.

Gregory taught a series of classes in September, and Speirs reviewed the designs from his office in Scotland. Both were also on hand in Winston-Salem the week of November 10 to help students work out last minute technical details. "Light is such a powerful medium that it can change people's perceptions of things when it's done properly," says Speirs. "The important thing with something like this is the public coming along and getting intrigued."

The Winston-Salem Light Project was scheduled for November 13 to 15, the weekend of the annual Piedmont Craftsmen's Fair of contemporary arts and crafts, an event that draws crowds to downtown's up-and-coming arts district. The city has its roots in manufacturing, but with the decline in tobacco and textiles, the area is looking to a future built around research, technology, and the arts. And city boosters hoped the illuminated post office, now used as a music venue, would help to establish Winston-Salem as a regional arts destination. This project was part of a growing public-art movement that uses lighting techniques borrowed from the theatre and architecture to light public spaces in dramatic ways.

Gregory and Speirs have both used lighting for public art. Coates, of the arts school, first thought of bringing stage lighting to downtown Winston-Salem while he was on a trip to Florence, Italy about 10 years ago where he saw a catalog from a 1981 arts festival. He was taken with photos of an unfinished church in the Piazza S. Spirito, lit up with projected images. "What would Winston-Salem be like if you drove through one night, and every building was blue?" Coates says he thought. "If downtown were lit well, that would make it a beacon."

Public lighting projects in other cities have become annual

The Winston-Salem Light Project 2008

THE MILLENNIUM CENTER

LIGHTING

149 Phillips Solid-State Lighting Solutions/Color Kinetics
ColorBlast 12 TR w/Clear Lens
39 Phillips Solid-State Lighting Solutions/Color Kinetics
ColorBlast 12 TR w/Frosted Lens
26 ETC Source Four PAR WXFL
1 ETC Eos Console
1 ETC Radio Focus Remote
2 ETC Net3/ACN 4-Port Nodes
1 ETC Net3/ACN 2-Port Nodes
2 ETC Sensor 12x2.4kW Portable Dimmer Pack
2 City Theatrical SHoW DMX
19 City Theatrical PDS-750 12-Unit Power Supply
30 Lutron Hi-Lume FDB-4827 Dimmable Fluorescent Ballasts

PROJECTION

1 ETC Ion Console with 2x20 Universal Fader Wing
1 Green Hippo Hippotizer V3
2 Sanyo PLC-XP57 Projector with 1.8-2.6:1 Lens
2 Bakerwood Lite Industries ProDowser

SELECTED CREW

Project Coordinators: Norman Coates and Brad Peterson
Design Advisors: Paul Gregory and Jonathan Speirs
Lighting Designers: Sean Beach, Alex Fogel, Michael Kohler, Brad Peterson, Paola Rodriguez, and Samuel Rushen
Production Electrician: Eric Gerard
Assistant Production Electrician: Lee Goldstein
Eos/Lighting Programmer: Ben Eells
Ion/Projection Programmer: Eric Gerar

VENDORS

Lighting: 4Wall Entertainment Lighting, Al Ridella and Phillip Rogers
Consoles: Electronic Theatre Controls (ETC)
SHoW DMX: City Theatrical and Ron Fogel and Associates
Hi-Lume dimmable ballasts: Lutron Electronics

Students drew color inspiration for the façade from artists such as Claude Monet, Barnett Newman, and Peter Max.

Paul Gregory and Jonathan Speirs taught design students at University of North Carolina School of the Arts how to apply theatrical techniques to architecture.

events, as well. A project in Alingsas, Sweden, for example, which Gregory has helped design, includes public buildings, private homes, and parks that last year drew 75,000 visitors. The Winston-Salem Light Project came to life more than a year ago with support from San Antonio, TX-based Lucifer Lighting Company, owned by Suzanne and Gilbert Matthews, who are also members of the school's board of advisors. They provided funding for the project, including an internship for student Brad Peterson, who spent two-and-a-half months working at Gregory's firm.

Gregory began his career in theatre and has worked with students before, first in Bochum, Germany to light a World War II bunker. More recently, he worked with students at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth to light the Moudy Building. During seminars in September, he asked the lighting students in Winston-Salem to draw their inspirations from particular artists. He has used that technique in his own work, having lit the Marcus Center for Performing Arts

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—Jonathan Speirs

in Milwaukee, which opened in April, in colors inspired by Georgia O'Keefe, the Southwestern painter famous for landscapes and oversized paintings of flowers.

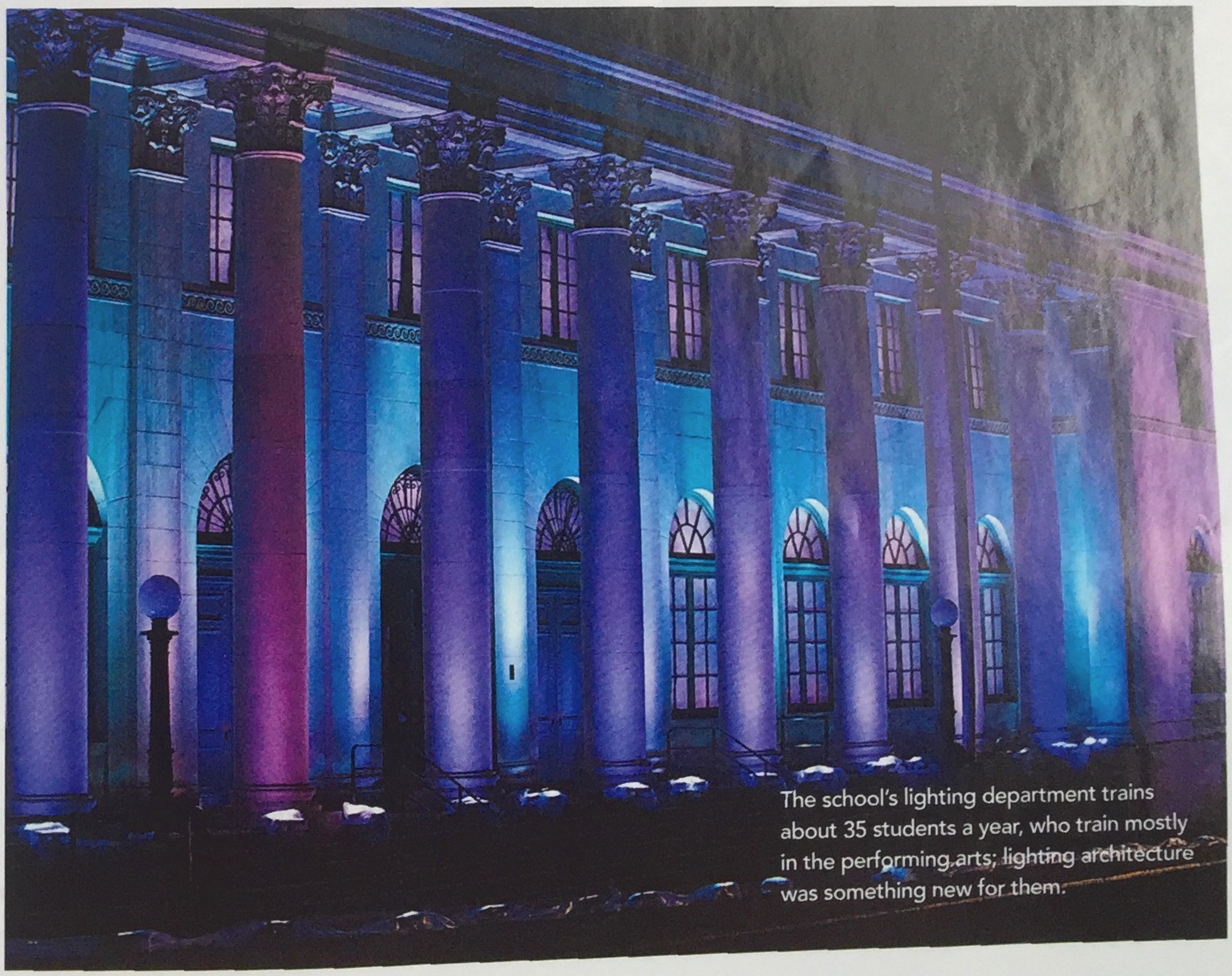
Beyond the design work, the students had numerous technical questions to solve. How do you get more than 200 lights working on a cold city street? What do you use to cover the windows so they glow with color? What angle makes sense so that the columns and cornices can be lit in difference tones?

The rented equipment was delivered to the school production shop the Friday before the show. The school rented 188 Philips Solid-State Lighting Solutions/Color Kinetics ColorBlast® 12 TRs, both flood and spot versions, to light the façade and backlight the windows. The students also used equipment from the school's inventory, including two Sanyo PLC-XP57s for projecting images on the wings and 26 ETC Source Four PAR WXFLs to light the balustrade on the roof. With opening night just six days away, students spent the weekend prepping equipment, numbering every fixture, building and labeling cable looms, setting up control consoles, and testing fixtures. Monday night was spent setting up the equipment on the street outside the post office. They pitched a tent for a control booth across the street and set up the projectors on lift towers so that passing buses wouldn't block the images. The ETC Ion and Eos consoles were programmed Monday and Tuesday night, and a dress rehearsal Wednesday night lasted until five the next morning.

Working out in the open meant that, each night, the students had to strike all 188 lights, the projectors, and the consoles and be ready to set up again the following night. They spent days ahead of time planning their work calls and dividing up labor for efficient set up and striking. The trickiest part was making the City Theatrical SHoW DMX wireless DMX system work on a busy city street. With the control booth across the street from where the dimmers were set up, students found that traffic interfered with the signals. Eventually, they mounted the transmitter in a tree to avoid interference.

The show opened Thursday night, after it had rained all day, but by evening, the weather cleared, leaving the air thick with mist. The opening images and colors ended up being inspired by Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh. In a segment inspired by Marc Chagall, blue light bathed the façade, the windows glowed red, and the balustrade on the roof was bright with white light. "Look at the light coming out of the mist—all focused straight," Gregory said that night as he watched from the street.

The show lasted about half an hour and repeated through Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. Traffic slowed, and a crowd gathered. The display ended in brilliant color inspired by Peter Max, and the crowd cheered. Some were arts patrons, and others were longtime city residents drawn to the show by memories. "It's amazing what you can do with light," said C.H. Adams, a retired fire chief who grew up playing on the post office steps. "It's hard to believe light can change a building that much." **LD**



The school's lighting department trains about 35 students a year, who train mostly in the performing arts; lighting architecture was something new for them.