

## The Hold Room, Season 2 Episode 22 – Michael Lindsey and Brandon Thrasher

### Transcript

#### **[Introduction]**

**TJ:** Welcome to The Hold Room with ACC: a quick update on all things relating to airport development as well as the Airport Consultants Council.

**Laura Canham:** This episode is part of the passenger experience headers hosted by ACC's Terminal and Facilities Committee in this series. We are collecting the experiences and perspectives about the future of passenger travel, including changing demographics such as the US population, aging and becoming more multicultural, new technologies, labor, and supply chain. Shortages and what the future may have in store. Thank you for joining us in the Hold Room.

#### **[Interview]**

**Carrie Wojcik:** Welcome back to the Hold Room, everyone. We're really excited to have Michael Lindsey and Brandon Thrasher with us from HLB. I think it would be really great to kick off this interview by having you both introduce yourself.

**Michael Lindsey:** Appreciate that. I'll jump in first. So again, my name is Michael Lindsey and I'm an associate principal with HLB lighting design. I actually began my journey in the lighting design field about 17 years ago as an intern for our Los Angeles office and I was lucky enough to join the staff full time and haven't looked back since. In 2016, I returned home to Colorado. It's where I grew up and originally from and spearheaded the opening of our Denver office. So, it was a geographic expansion for our firm and it started with just me and one other individual. And I think now we're at about 18 individuals here in the office. So, something I'm really proud about and, you know, really the beauty of what our industry of lighting design and our firm offer is this variety of project type and market sector. So, in my 17 years now in the industry I've really worked on every different type of project out there, whether it's a small and intimate kind of 600 square foot elevator lobby or a million square foot aviation terminal. As it relates to the goals that I have within industry, really top of mind to me is education. Education about what it is that we do as a lighting design professional. Ahead of my time were really true pioneers in our industry who helped establish the foundation of our profession. And I'm lucky enough to be standing here today because of that. But the reality is that our work isn't done myself and my other industry colleagues are always looking to educate and let people know what it is we do and the value we bring to the environment. We are always striving to have lighting design with a seat at the table a little bit about me, I'll hand it over to you, Brandon.

**Brandon Thrasher:** Yeah. Thanks, Michael. I'm Brandon Thrasher. I'm a senior principal with HLB and I'm the managing principal of our San Francisco office. My journey kicked off a little bit differently. I started off in theatrical lighting design and I really dove into crafting designs for live events and museum work when I first started. But life takes its twists and I gradually got pulled into the architectural aspect of the field and I've really been hooked ever since. I also had a stint at Henderson Engineers and during my time there I took on the role of the Director for their architectural lighting group. It was kind of

interesting to me because I didn't come from an engineering background. My background was in theater, but that experience really did open up my eyes to the engineering side of things and it's just kind of fun how life mixes things up a little bit. My goals are really to create cool lighting designs and really to have the team work together to make sure that our designs really align perfectly with the whole architectural aesthetic. And I really love to use light as a medium to give spaces feelings that you just won't forget. I think that my theater background is a big part of why I'm so passionate about that and creating those one-of-a-kind experiences for those spaces.

**Max Vale:** Awesome. Well, thank you both very much. Let's pick up on a couple of things that each of you said and these are this is kind of the same question directed at both of you. Michael, you talked about how lighting elevates the environment that folks find themselves in. And Brandon, you talked about how lighting can give space feelings. Could both of you expound upon what that means and how those things are achieved through lighting?

**Brandon:** Lighting plays such a big part of the feelings that you have when you walk into a space. I think it's really a subconscious element that people don't always notice. But when you're in a space that has great lighting, you can really feel the energy or feel whatever emotion that is really associated with that that creates that atmosphere. And I always like to think that good lighting is something that you don't really perceive, but you usually perceive bad lighting. So, we want to try and give spaces a good feeling through lighting and my design process is always about what is the feeling that the space is going to have and how can we create that feeling through lighting in conjunction with the rest of the architecture, but really being able to highlight that throughout the space. And creating that journey, because sometimes we want to take people through different feelings as they go through the space and so really creating those different areas for people to either relax or dining or whatever the case may be.

**Michael:** And I think to build on you had mentioned, I tend to use the word elevate a lot because lighting design is something that theoretically anyone can do. Obviously, we believe strongly and those who've experienced those with education to really execute that. And I think the proof is in that experience, once you've been a part of it. Certainly so much of what we do, there are requirements of light levels and energy code and those things that need to be met, but they can be met in a whole variety of ways, and oftentimes people have the misconception that a strict energy code, a strict budget, means that you can't be creative and you can't elevate design. And that's really not true. We pride ourselves as design professionals to really step up to the challenges. And how do we create something special? How do we create something that's memorable while working within those various constraints? And so, for me, each project is unique and different and how we elevate it will always vary depending on all the different factors that go into design. But it is always possible and having that seat at the table being a part of those conversations collectively we can do really great things with our design partners on behalf of ownership groups.

**Carrie:** That is awesome. I think that having a theater background is really an interesting touch that you get to add to the projects that you're involved with, Brandon. One thing that really caught my attention is you were both talking about connection points. Elevating the experience. Creating emotion and Michael brought in the topic of talking with stakeholders. What that's going to look like while dealing with the practical side of things. I would be interested in knowing how that process goes. What are the types of goals or emotions or experiences your clients are wanting to create and how are they going through that process with lighting and working with your team?

**Michael:** I'll start with that it really is dependent on the project type. There are some projects, in particular those that are much more exterior driven or perhaps a little bit more monumental things like bridges, building facades, things that frankly have a very outward neighbor focused condition. In those instances, we are responding to the surrounding community and it's something that you could be standing on your back porch overlooking this beautiful lake and then all of a sudden this bridge comes in and you're trying to light it. Well, those stakeholders. Have a really strong voice, as they should, in what we're doing, and so it's really important for us early and often to engage them in the conversation. Everybody has an opinion and those voices should be heard. So even in a private office condition or in the aviation world in which you're interacting with a port that's kind of representing their employees and staffing as well as passengers, we need to hear from them. No one knows their building, their staff, their community better than those that are living in it. Certainly, as design professionals, we try to ingrain ourselves in that as much as possible. But the real first step is that listening and so certainly we pride ourselves and getting involved early, coming to those conversations with the sense of curiosity and desire to learn. And from those conversations, then evolve into how do we support those things that are really positive for them that are really working well already? How do we continue to build on that? And then what are those pain points that we hear about and how might we resolve. And it's never a linear process without a doubt you're going back and forth, and it's not just a one-time conversation, something that you need to continue to revisit throughout the design of a project that we find in that conversation. The end result is then really something that's well received and people are really the most excited about.

**Brandon:** I'd also say I think just reiterate Michael's point is that it's important for lighting practitioners to get involved in those conversations early. Sometimes it gets forgotten that we need to be talking to the stakeholders as well.

**Max:** Let's pick up on that a little bit more. So, you want to have your lighting reflect what the local culture needs; what the local stakeholders need. This is obviously such a niche topic that a lot of people I think don't think about. Like you said, that it's mostly subconscious on a practical level, what are the techniques used? And let's talk specifically about an airport terminal environment that can help reflect the values that the community has when you're looking at lighting design?

**Michael:** Earlier, Brandon touched on it a little bit in that I find as a lighting designer, we tend to be most successful when people are not responding or reacting to lighting, but they're instead responding and reacting to the space itself. Whether it's volume, it's texture, it's materiality. Most of the time if we do our job well, people are responding to that. And so kind of in response to your question, a lot of the cues that we take are from our design partners with those interior designers, airport planners, architects, folks that have ingrained themselves also in the culture in which we're trying to depict in these spaces. And we're really looking to support that with how do we execute and, again, elevate. You'll hear that word a lot. Those materials and spaces with lighting. So, if we do our job well, I believe strongly that you're not recognizing the light itself, but you recognize the beautiful trellis there on the side wall or the texture and materiality of the carpet, those spaces that really have already been identified as real cultural pieces by the designers themselves. Certainly, you'll also hear and there's a, you know, big desire for a level of branding or a level of again reflection of community that can be communicated with colored lighting. I think we always want to be careful and tread carefully there to again make sure that it's representative of the community as a whole. Not everywhere is Las Vegas. There should be a different feeling if you're walking into a Las Vegas airport, than in Birmingham, but it doesn't mean that

it can't have a place. But it's again that engagement with the Port Authority themselves, making sure they're comfortable with it. What is it representing and educating on them on its use and everything as well.

**Carrie:** Thank you, Michael. Within the airport as well, there's a lot of concerns about just how passengers are changing. Who is traveling? Doing what is their ability level? Are they able to navigate the airport? So as you're getting involved in a project like an airport, the ability is just different depending on the passenger. The communities can be very different. How are you ensuring like there's equity in the lighting design and that it's accommodating all the passengers needs?

**Michael:** As an industry, we are grappling with as many people are. What is equity in the field?

**Brandon:** We got brought in on an interesting challenge by a client to look at lighting for video conferencing on an equity level. The client wanted to look at video lighting setup that would be fair for those sitting in the room as those that we're joining remotely. But while we started to dive into the topic, one of the things that came up and we started to study, which was kind of really interesting, is the issue of lighting color temperature and skin tone. So, we all have amazing skin tones and different skin tones, but not all skin tones look great under the same kind of lighting. So, we really went down that track and started to look at that more. We tried to do research on what is out there and what studies have been done. Surprisingly, there's not a lot of studies that have been done solve that puzzle. So, I would say one thing we really do need to do some more research and look at how those two elements fit together, say that there's really more to explore on that front so that everybody looks their best under lighting because it's a big part of our daily lives. But as we go back to equity also is that one of the things that our firm also does is we look at daylighting and how does daylighting and natural lighting all blend together, and one of the things as we're developing our designs here, we talk about equity and there's people with visual disabilities or different sensitivities to light. So, as we're talking about daylighting and even electric lighting, making sure that there's not glare in these facilities because that could be really disabling to some people. And also the people that work in these facilities, depending on where the gate agents or TSA depending on how they're oriented, it could be really problematic for those. So this is a wide topic, but it is something that is really important. And also, if you think about wayfinding, that's another important element that can be related to lighting and lighting can enforce those cues as you're moving through the facility and help with that as well. But I'd say there's just a lot of elements that all sort of need to fit together and create those environments that those that have different visual abilities or sensitivities can also function the same as anybody else throughout the facility.

**Michael:** I'll build on that quickly because they think we talk about equity and lighting specific as it relates to airport facilities and concourses and things. It really all starts with recognition to me. It's easy, it's obvious to recognize that the passenger experience tends to be at the top of the list, makes a lot of sense. They're the ones coming in and out in essence paying the bills at the end of the day. But their experience is often short and temporary yet can leave a really lasting impact, hopefully in a positive nature, but I think we all have stories of negative as well. But what we find is that it can often at times be forgotten that these facilities are also office buildings for folks. They're here 8-9 hours a day, sometimes likely longer, and so our design and our thought process can't simply be about the passenger experience, but it also needs to focus on the employee. Brandon noted it of whether it's a gate agent, a TSA employee. Lighting both the integration of natural as well as electric needs to be comfortable. We

find that rightfully so, these spaces are now opening up a lot more into much larger expansive volumes and introducing thankfully that access to natural, light line of sight to outdoors and it's such a critical element to bring those in and integrate them thoughtfully because it really is such a valuable tool to reinforce those positive experiences. Often travelers are jumping multiple time zones, they may not know what day it is. And so, the opportunity to exit a plane and immediately see the sun in the sky or the ambience of kind of the glowing moon helps provide those quick cues to you as an individual of really what's happening. Touching on the equity of it, it really is we believe strongly in that integration of natural light and in that view to the out of doors and making that available to everyone, certainly not every room can have a window looking outside. But thankfully the design partners that we've been working with so much are integrating that more so and our job is to do so successfully and partnering it in a holistic manner with electric lighting as is.

**Brandon:** Also, just wellness. Making sure that, as Michael mentioned, those that are traveling can get back onto their rhythm, their daily rhythm. We talk about that the passenger experience a lot, but we talk about equity and lighting. We have to think about a lot of these facilities run many hours, if not 24 hours a day. We have night shift workers and we talk about it a lot for hospital environments, but we don't really talk about it in these other types of facilities a lot where we have shift workers and helping them as well with whatever they may need to keep people alert or making sure that their circadian rhythm is in line too. So, it goes a little bit deeper. But I like to think of it as wellness.

**Carrie:** It definitely is a wellness concept. The thought process on the video conferencing and the lighting and accommodating different skin tones as a woman who uses a lot of makeup it is really interesting when you start diving into the history of makeup and how it used to bleach skin and was, essentially designed for not a huge variance in skin tone, so it's kind of interesting how history repeats itself. That's pretty fascinating to me.

**Max:** Michael, you mentioned that if a passenger is moving through an airport, it's generally speaking a fleeting moment, but it still plays into the passenger experience very much. An example I could think of is if I'm using the restroom and I'm washing my hands and I look up and see myself in the mirror, and if I'm under an electrical light, that makes me look like a zombie, then that's going to influence my experience as a passenger. Same with employees. If they're on a video call in the offices back of house, you can see yourself in the little corner of the screen, and especially because so much of what we do these days is virtual. Poor lighting is certainly bound to have an impact on an employee's emotional health, but it's all on a subconscious level. Predominantly, I'm curious a little bit more on the technical side when we're talking about electrical lighting, what materials tend to be used and can be helpful in responding to a lot of the fact that we're moving through different times of day.

**Michael:** Natural light was the very first light source. There's nothing that can mimic it, can replace it. It always should be top of list top of mind when looking to try to illuminate a space. Now again speaking to the aviation world, we know that these facilities are operating well past the daylight hour so it can always be the case. But the real embracing and integration of that natural light source into all spaces is really important. We've seen a big push and trend into a lot of restrooms moving out of sort of the central core of a concourse and really starting to push more toward the perimeter. So, you do have that integration of natural light even when you're just in the bathroom for two minutes. It really is utilizing that tool first and foremost. I think also Max to answer your question, so much of what we do is based on experience and that doesn't mean that you have to be a lighting design professional, but just as an

individual that's focusing on the surroundings of a space. There have been very astute studies that even just the directionality of light can evoke different emotions and different feelings, and that's why I always challenge people to say you don't have to be a designer. You can be a software technician, but you can still have an opinion and it's still valid of how a space, how an environment makes you feel.

**Brandon:** I would say not any material specific, but I would say the finished color really play an important part. Looking at those finishes, how does that look during the day? How does it look at night under the electric lighting? Because those two experiences could be very different and very different in a positive way. But on the flip side, you could have something very different in a negative way that is not intended. So, I think that's another element to look at during the design process.

**Carrie:** I think of Denver Airport and it's outside. There was natural light.

**Michael:** I still remember a similar experience, but it was in Las Vegas at a hotel that was 40 feet up in the air and they had windows in the the restrooms. That was my memorable experience just to say wow, this seems odd that when I would have windows the restroom, it is more of a memorable experience than I think people are incorporating.

**Carrie:** And it gives that feeling of looking in the mirror and you don't look like you're dead tired. You look energized, there's natural light on you. So interesting how that has an impact.

**Max:** So, when you're at the table with airport designers and airport construction managers, what are some questions that you tend to bring to the table that are often overlooked by these folks?

**Michael:** I tend to start with the question of what's working well. For you in your current space your current building. What? What are some of the positives? Focus on our positives and continue to do that and build on that. And then equally diving into what's not working for you. Part of our job is to challenge the comfort zone of a client. It's not uncommon that we'll have clients talk about lighting controls are too complex and we just want very simple switches and things on the wall. And the reality is that for good reason, energy code tends to be pulling us away from that type of mechanism, and so our job is to again hear what they are comfortable with, what has worked well, what they may be hesitant and nervous about, and find the right happy medium in which we could challenge them to evolve, challenge them to grow. But also, we don't want to institute a design solution that then will never be used, and they find some way to bypass it and change things after the fact. So, I would say that that tends to be my leading question is really what's working well for you. Let's celebrate that first, and then let's get our hands into what we may need to improve.

**Brandon:** I think one of the things that sometime is overlooked is what are the potentials for the future and how can we accommodate the change for the future. I mean we think about these facilities, they don't. It's not like they're renovated every five or ten years. So really looking forward to how can we accommodate growth or any other reconfigurations that the lighting system can still support that as the facility changes and adapts for future needs.

**Carrie:** I'm curious how sustainability initiatives play a role in that thought process.

**Michael:** Most people at this point, I think would agree and are well aware of what LED technology has really done to to our profession, really revolutionizing how we can approach things. The envelope and width they're developed and from a sustainability standpoint, the energy consumption that they really

have. So, I think for us it is trying to look holistically at the overall sustainability picture. Just because you're using LED technology doesn't inherently mean that you're doing it the right way. So, we're looking at the full story of a lighting product and a lighting system. Where is this product coming from? If and when there are failures? Because again, we will continue to try to break the myth that LED lights last forever. That is not true. To all of our maintenance staff that's out there: You will still have a job right. There's things that inherently will go wrong. It's electric circuitry. Electronic circuitry. So, there's things that will happen and so we need to and we have moved out of the aspect of if there's a failure that entire lighting fixture. Throw it away. Put a new one in, right? We're looking at opportunities for modularity in which failing components can be removed and recycled. New components can then be brought in. So, it's really thinking about that big picture to it all. And I would say more so again, a lot of this is driven by energy codes, which I know a lot of our team members are heavily involved with because we believe so strongly in them. And it really comes to lighting controls. The most efficient light source is one that you don't have on, and so it talks to the big picture. Like we've said, of incorporation of natural light into a space. But also the appropriate control so that if you've got that natural light, that electric lighting sometimes is turned off, sometimes remains on at a very small level, and then when the building or the space is just not being used at all, let's shut it down. Let's try to reduce that consumption overall. And that's, you know, specific to this market sector and aviation as well as so many others that we operate in is really handling the control perspective of it all.

**Carrie:** What are some of the questions that you're asking when you're on a project that might bring about some challenges or what are the common challenges that you're trying to uncover or overcome in the process of designing lighting for a facility.

**Michael:** Comfort and glare, whether it be from direct sunlight or from electric lighting that both can institute uncomfortable glare. You brought up Carrie earlier the fact of lighting in a restroom often times one of the approaches is we want to bring vertical light to people's faces, and oftentimes that will be at the mirror itself. If that's not done correctly it can be very uncomfortable. One success story that I have goes back to the day lighting integration side of things and our work that our team did on the Portland Airport Concourse E expansion that completed just a few years ago through our daylight and sunlight penetration studies, we identified that there was a lot of direct sunlight coming through the facade and it wasn't directly hitting the gate agents, but the reflection off of the polished terrazzo floor was. And evaluating and identifying that early in the design process allowed us the opportunity to show what was happening to the design architect, interior designer as well as share with the port and brainstorm on. OK what? What does that mean? Do we change something at the facade? Do we change something at the floor? Do we try to move the gate podium and there's no one simple answer. But with an engaged partnership of team members, there is always a solution.

**Brandon:** My biggest challenge that I think I continually see is just outdated lighting standards from some of these facilities and really trying to understand the why behind some of the standards and educating those clients and trying to bring them up to speed and seeing if there's sort of any flexibility or moving things into the current so that we can really provide the best experience for their facility.

**Max:** So Michael, the story that you shared about Portland really speaks to the importance of having a seat at the table with the other architects, with the other designers, because in that instance, where there was reflection of the glare off the terrazzo, the solution was not with the lighting itself, but the solution is with the other materials in the building and that type of solution could only be pursued with

input from both of those folks were involved in the construction of the facility, so thank you to both of you to joining us on the Hold Room podcast today. We really enjoyed talking to you and hearing a bit about what HLB is doing in the industry.

**Michael:** On behalf of myself and Brandon, I really just wanted to say thank you for you all for, for having us, letting us speak so passionately about lighting design and how it fits into the aviation world.

**Brandon:** Yeah, thank you, Carrie and Max. It's great to have this conversation today and really bring things to light. No pun intended.

***[Outro]***

**Wendy:** Thanks for joining us in The Hold Room for this special podcast series exploring the new passenger experience. You can find more from this series on the ACC Training Hub—that's [training.acconline.org/the-hold-room](https://training.acconline.org/the-hold-room)—or wherever you get your podcasts, including Apple Podcast, Spotify, Stitcher, etc. Follow us for more content from the Airport Consultants Council. You can support this podcast by leaving a rating or review and by telling your friends and colleagues about the podcast. Thanks again.