

LIFE TAKES A CONTEMPORARY TURN

This Swiss couple banks on enlightening a traditional market.



A colorful storefront heralds the contemporary mix of merchandise inside.

Mid-life career changes are not merely an American phenomenon. Susan Inderbinen and her husband, Moritz – a couple from Switzerland – are like many who yearn for a change when they strike a certain age. As their respective 50th birthdays approached, they decided to take a giant leap – across the ocean.

“Our goal was to do something together which was completely new and different before we [turned] 50,” says Inderbinen. Having always enjoyed their vacations to Sarasota, Fla., that is where the duo chose to

settle. Their plan was to open a small lighting store to pay the bills. By investing in a new company, they were given business visas which allowed them to live and

work in the city they had grown to love.

That was 10 years ago; today Light Up Your Life is 6,000 square feet, staffed by 10 employees, and has earned a reputation among the architectural community as a source for unusual fixtures and expert design services.

“I have always been fascinated by glass, especially how light plays with art glass,” relates Susan Inderbinen, a former corporate events manager in her native country.

“The importance of lighting really struck me one day as I was overseeing an interview by CNN with the president of a pharmaceutical company. The producers [simply] placed him in a big chair in a rather shabby room, and I thought, ‘This doesn’t represent the status of a company officer.’ By the time they had finished lighting the set, however, it was absolutely



The first floor not only allows ample display space, but also accommodates frequent gatherings of area architects and designers.



The stairway leads to the second level, while the high ceilings help clients visualize decorative fixtures in their homes.

fabulous, and it was only the lighting that had changed!”

A year before they moved, Inderbinen left her job and traveled with various European lighting representatives to educate herself as much as possible about the business. There was more to learn when the couple began their endeavor in the United States. “The European market is very different from that in the States,” she declares. “During our vacations in Florida, we noted that the Americans were about six years behind Europe in design, systems, and trends. A lighting business specializing in contemporary lighting was non-existent in the area at the

time. I guess we took a big chance, but we felt confident because no one was selling lighting the way we wanted to do it.”

Starting with a small rented space of 1,200 square feet, their enterprise began to grow. Within 18 months, they bought their own building, and after another 3½ years expanded the site to its current size.

Over time, Inderbinen has seen a dramatic change regarding that six-year lag in trends.

“Many Americans are thinking more about lighting. Instead of [being] last on the list, it has moved to the top. Our clients in Sarasota are very interested and

ask a lot of questions. Americans in general are now probably only a year-and-a-half behind Europe,” she relates.

While unusual fixtures make up a majority of the offerings at Light Up Your Life, the real goal is to properly illuminate a space. “Lighting should be effective. You don’t always need to see the light sources; it should not be distracting,” Inderbinen points out. “For example, when our objective is to highlight artwork, the fixture should not be the focal point. [We sell our clients] what we truly believe is the best lighting for their individual application.

“We do a lot of research to give clients options,” Inderbinen says. “We have managed to build up a wonderful sales staff who love what they do and believe in working together as a team. They approach each assignment as a personal creative vision, a sensibility that is often overlooked,” she explains. “We do not have employees working on commission. They are paid a good salary, which means that sales are made with sincerity. This way, our clients are happy with our service as well as the product.”

Every salesperson has worked in design and is encouraged to attend continuing education courses and to research developments in the marketplace. There is also a certified CAD designer on staff who can work on plans with architects.

The business regularly shares its knowledge with Sarasota’s design community. Inderbinen typically schedules education evenings in the showroom. “I guess the organizer aspect from my previous [career] has not left my system,” she says with a smile. “I especially love it when the students from the neighboring Ringling College of Art and Design visit our display room. Whether they are invited to an event – or they



The open feeling makes consultations with architects a pleasant experience, while design students appreciate the opportunity to view the newest lighting creations in a gallery setting.

just come on their own and look around – their enthusiasm is contagious and their curiosity is motivating. We always take time out for them.” Light Up Your Life recently donated more than \$11,000 for the capital expansion project at the college, which is located down the street.

The Inderbinens also hold evening get-togethers for individual groups such as architects and engineers, designers, electricians, and students. “The architects are showing greater interest in lighting, especially with green building standards becoming more prevalent. They are coming to us for answers about light and

heat relating to air conditioning loads and LEED certification, but they still don’t want dramatic lighting effects to take away from their building design,” the retailer quips.

“There is a mix among the interior designers who come to our events,” Inderbinen observes. “Some want to know how they should direct electricians and want to be prepared, while others are only interested in the visual aspects of lighting. Ten years ago that was not the case, but there has been a big change and most are coming around.”

Eco-conscious technology has become a huge factor in Europe

and is becoming more so in the USA. “We have always been quite green, even before LEDs became so popular,” she asserts. “We do believe in low-voltage, however, and that a properly designed system can use less electricity.” The showroom has promoted LEDs for several years, whenever a project could benefit from the technology.

The showroom, a gallery of cutting-edge fixtures, is arranged with displays representing home environments such as a dining room, kitchen, bar area, home office, and bath (complete with a shower) equipped with appropriate, contemporary lighting and controls for clients and consumers to try. Even the office Inderbinen and her husband share is a demonstration area for proper lighting.

Despite the fact that the Sarasota area is rife with traditional tastes, Inderbinen says that doesn’t deter customers from mixing in modern fixtures. “Contemporary chandeliers and lamps can complement a classic style or antiques beautifully. In Europe, we refurbish homes that are 100 years old. Sleek and minimalist lighting works beautifully to enhance the centuries-old antiques,” she declares.

At Light Up Your Life, the staff welcomes walk-ins, but prefer to do on-site analyses. “Anyone who comes into the store is a project,” Inderbinen notes. “Even if they are merely looking for a dining room chandelier, our employees want to know how the room is used every day. Does the customer entertain frequently or read at the dining room table, for example.

“We have built a reputation for honesty and we do not oversell a client,” Inderbinen asserts. “Even in this economy, our reputation has kept us busy. We are known for doing great lighting design, sometimes under budget! One project



Susan and Moritz Inderbinen took a Florida community by storm and have become key partners for architects and designers.

designated \$5,000 for lighting and we ended up \$2,000 under. Customers appreciate that.”

Even the Web site (lights-sarasota.com) offers money-saving tips, such as using dimmers, plus an invitation to stop into the store to see how retro-fitting an LED recessed fixture will provide both greater illumination and savings.

Every fixture sale represents lighting in a different space, and Inderbinen prefers that her staff talk with the customer about the specifics of the room and its use before making a sale. That is why the store doesn't use the Web to sell product directly. “Our site tells people who we are and what we do. Lighting is too important to merely sell through the Internet,” she contends.

Although the Inderbinens' daughter and son-in-law have also moved to the U.S. and are now part of the company, there is still

family in Switzerland and England.

“We miss them, but we have contact with them probably more often than many other families living in the same city,” Inderbinen contends. “Visiting Florida for vacation is still a family tradition [for them], and we go to Europe and combine business with pleasure.” The couple attends many technical shows such as Light+Building in Germany and Euroluce in Italy, but also check out the design fairs such as 100% Light and MAISON&OBJET.

Witnessing all the European innovation remains a bit frustrating for Inderbinen. “I know I will still have to wait at least two years before we can sell these great products in the U.S., however, the gap is closing. That's very encouraging.” ❖