



Neha Sivaprasad

By SHIRLEY COYLE, LC

CAREER PATHS ARE NOT RUNNING TO A SINGLE FINISH LINE; EVERYONE

When Neha Sivaprasad describes her path into lighting, she doesn't begin with technology or titles. She begins with feelings. Neha recalls that as a quiet, observant child, she was aware of how spaces made her feel. "I didn't articulate it then...but I think I was always intrigued by how space made you feel, and so I wanted to design spaces!"

Neha's formal journey started in a demanding five-year bachelor's program in architecture at University of Mumbai, where students studied architecture from the first day, culminating in a major thesis project. Her project required the design of a full campus with multiple buildings, landscape, lighting, stormwater management, etc. Deciding to learn more about the technology behind buildings, she applied to several Masters programs in the US.

In the Building Science program at the University of Southern California in L.A. Neha's "amazing" lighting professor, **Marc Schiler**, opened her eyes to lighting design as a dedicated field: "I said, there are people designing just lighting?" Noting her interest in lighting, Program Chair **Doug Noble** suggested she take electives in the theater school and learn theatrical lighting. "It was fantastic – our assignments were to light plays ...that's where I learned you can manipulate light to create an emotion...that light is a really powerful medium."

Over the years, Neha has taken multiple leaps into entrepreneurship. The first during architecture school, co-founding an interior design turnkey business with two classmates, designing small apartments and retail shops. "We didn't earn much" says Neha, "but we learned a lot!"

In 2010, Neha opened her second business – returning to India to set up an independent lighting design practice, rare in India at the time. With only five years of professional lighting experience, she shuttled between India and the U.S., building relationships... Neha laughs: "that was fun. I cold-called architects, said 'I love your buildings, I want to light them.' From some of them I got good responses, from others 'what do you mean? We light them - we do lighting design'." For three years, Neha won work, completed rewarding projects, and proved her concept.

Family decisions brought her back to the U.S. full-time, but the experience reinforced both her resilience and her appetite for building something of her own. Neha's biggest challenge was starting her third business, launching **Sol Light Studio in 2021**—seemingly with the highest personal and professional stakes. She had chosen to leave a successful role at a large firm, a great boss and meaningful project responsibilities. Neha realized she wanted creative autonomy, varied project types, aligning her work with her values. With encouragement from her husband, Neha took the leap.

Sol Light Studio reflects several principles that matter deeply to Neha. First is the diversity of the work. She resists specialization, designing all kinds of projects.

Equally important to Neha is working with people who are passionate about what they do, whether it's cutting-edge design or deeply community-oriented work. In San Francisco, Neha has worked in neighborhoods heavily

impacted by drug activity, collaborating with community members to use light as a tool for enhancement rather than surveillance. Neha's work there led her to meet **Edward Bartholomew of Light Justice**. After some of her projects received recognition through the Light Justice Now Awards, she was invited onto their Board, and Neha also now serves as Associate Director and Chair of the awards.

Neha stresses the need for awareness of the politics of lighting: "most of our time, energy, resources, technology, as an industry, is geared towards high-profile clients, high-profile projects. How do we bring awareness within industry and beyond that we can use our skills to impact people that don't have the benefit of good lighting? Lighting is an infrastructure that is not distributed equally over the world." She notes that in some wealthy neighborhoods, darkness and carefully regulated lighting are treated as a privilege, while elsewhere communities struggle for basic illumination.

When asked about advice for those coming into the industry, Neha offers: "Lighting touches everything and the industry is rich with people entering from architecture, theatre, engineering, art, and more... listen, absorb, and build relationships—create a rich, personal knowledge base not just from books, but from people."

Neha also stresses the importance of defining one's own success, especially in an era of curated online lives and constant comparison. Career paths are not running to a single finish line; everyone starts in a different place; remember to enjoy the process.

Volunteering, Neha believes, is one of the most powerful ways for emerging professionals to grow. Organizations such as **IES**, **IALD**, **Light Justice**, **WILD**, and others offer opportunities to contribute, meet people across the industry, and gain exposure to a wide range of perspectives. Seasoned designers who may seem like distant "titans" are, in her experience, remarkably generous with their time when approached through these channels.

Outside of lighting, Neha's life is deeply enriched by art and dance. She spends time drawing—pen on paper—and maintains a separate, low-key Instagram presence for her artwork. And a lot of Neha's "time and discipline" is spent on Kathak, the Indian classical dance form Neha has studied for 19 years.

Neha was surprised to find the largest Kathak school outside India, right in the San Francisco Bay Area. Today, Neha is a company member at her guru's school, and Kathak is part of her daily life. She describes solo storytelling on stage as both an act of self-connection and self-forgetting—an exhilarating, transformative experience. As the official lighting designer for her Kathak school, lighting performances for her guru and fellow dancers, Neha runs between the lighting console and the stage, embodying her dual identities as lighting designer and performer. Her younger daughter now studies Kathak at the same school.

Across architecture, lighting, community work, family and classical dance, Neha's story is ultimately about using light—literal and metaphorical—to support human experience with depth and care. ■