

Tour of VL Factory

Posted on March 11, 2010

11 March 2010

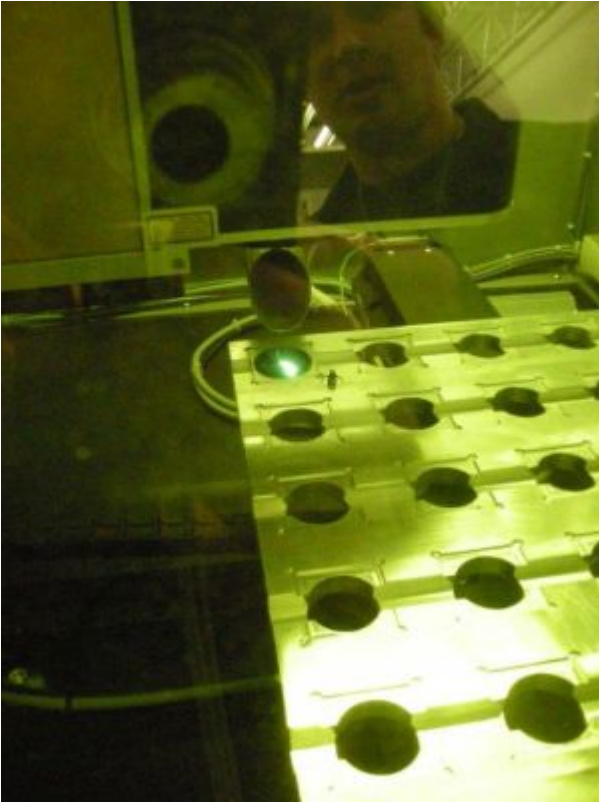
*South African Freelancer, Thomas Peters, was tiding over the quiet January with a holiday in the USA, when he also had opportunity to visit the Vari*Lite factory in Dallas, Texas, where he received a guided tour from George Masek, Product Marketing Manager. He sent us this e-mail which we trust you will enjoy reading as much as we did.*



A lot of people have been to the Martin Factory, and I guess a few to Robe, but who can say they've been to VL, the company that really did start everything we work with today back in 1981

with the original VL-1. It's great to go on a course and learning about the workings of a fixture, but talking to the man who builds the light is an experience in itself.

The VL factory itself is 'unassuming', a small reception area with a corridor to the workshop and a staircase to the offices- it's amazing to think what comes out of that small building. The most impressive thing about the entire experience is that the lights are made BY HAND- no production line with automated robots that do everything - there are people who sit at workbenches and put Selecon Lights, Strand Dimmers and all the Vari*Lite products together. As you walk, the things you overhear are amazing- one lady mentioned something about needing extra PCB's for 3500 spots; they're made right there, you go over to the person who MAKES THE PCB's and ask them for a handful and they'll be made up for you.



The likelihood of getting a 'dud' is pretty low- every fixture goes through a stress test in a hot/cold room. Because of the VLPS aspect, which was the cornerstone of the original business, the lights are built to a) work, and b) be serviced by people like me. There is no all-black wiring, for example the CYM functions are on CYM-coloured pairs so you know what you're frantically looking for when you're hanging upside down from the truss as

the guests are walking in. In the past the guys who made the lights were the same guys who went and used them on tour, so the fixtures are designed to be workhorses- we all try to fix the problem in the workshop before it becomes a problem on site, but hey, if you can MAKE the light to not give a problem, there won't be one. This also explains why they're all so ugly looking- the chassis is just a box to keep the guts inside, the product is what comes out the front! As for the new VLX, the cardboard box it will ship in is printed to look like a flightcase, complete with printed latches and all. I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of people try to store them like that permanently- especially in this country!

The demo room was very interesting- every fixture on the product line, set up for a real world application, with some dummies in costume and some scenery so that you can actually see what the light 'looks like'- as opposed to mechanically looking over all the functions.



Unfortunately the prototypes for the 'next generation' of fixtures weren't available yet, but I did come out with some interesting reading material regarding CDM lamps in Moving Lights.

I went out to dinner with the guys who were on the Vari*Lite Service Technician training course. We realized we were staying in the same hotel when we bumped into each other on the way to

dinner in the hotel's shuttle bus- the conversation about ColourBlasts quickly gave them away. I learnt a lot about their industry and how they do work, and they all had excellent reviews of the course, so I will have go again later this year!



Another interesting trip I made was into New York where I met with Robert Score, Corresponding Secretary for IATSE Local 1. He introduced me to the entire executive committee, who were all in the office that evening because they'd just finished negotiations on a big contract with a very large (read: the biggest) production company. I got to learn all about the inside history of the union, as well as its current stat, purpose and aims. Unlike South Africa, there are 50 year old men (and women!) still doing shows, because there is a trade union that makes sure they are all properly looked after. Of course, I relayed a few stories of how we do work here, but they were mostly interested in if it is in fact true that our toilets flush in the other direction...



Thanks for making it possible for me to go and see the factory in the first place, I picked up some nice swag and a lot of information, and I really appreciate it! At the rate you're going I'm sure you'll have a cracker of a year, but still, all the best for 2010!
Thomas

