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Low-Voltage Lighting Makes For High-Voltage Excitement

By Anne Patterson

It was flat, bland, lacking in drama and excitement — just plain boring. As a lighting designer, Randall Whitehead had every reason to be tired of his outmoded 1980s kitchen. And as president of Randall Whitehead Lighting Inc. (San Francisco), he also knew it was not likely to impress prospective clients.

Randall, who specializes in residential work, had remodeled the rest of his house, but the kitchen remained unimpressive. He considered a total tear-out but was a little taken aback by the cost. He settled on a less expensive and faster solution. The footprint of the kitchen was to remain the same, but the cabinets would be resurfaced and the countertops and appliances replaced. The crowning touch, though, would be new low-voltage lighting to add sparkle and drama — and all while conserving energy.

By definition, low-voltage lighting uses less than 30 volts of electricity; a transformer brings the power level down from the usual 110 volts of most electrical outlets. Low-voltage lighting, says Randall, is very versatile: dimmable, energy efficient, and offers pinpoint beam control, thanks to the wide variety of beam spreads available. The bulbs are small, which allows use of smaller more compact light sources.

Light layering

In every room he designs, Whitehead combines the four essential types of lighting:

- ▶ ambient lighting or overall lighting
- ▶ task lighting
- ▶ decorative lighting
- ▶ accent lighting

He calls this technique light layering and uses it to create a warm, inviting environment — especially important in the kitchen, he says, since this area is now used for both work and casual entertaining.

Recessed low-voltage ceiling spots provide good ambient lighting. To save money in his own kitchen, Randall retrimmed the existing recessed lights in the center of the ceiling. "Many homeowners now have the option of switching out the trims in their existing older recessed fixtures for a more updated look without replacing the whole fixture," he says. "Retrimming takes about 10 minutes."

In work areas, Randall recommends under-cabinet task lights. In his own kitchen, he replaced the existing tubular incandescent lighting fixtures with a linear low-voltage fixture, using a xenon light source. Another option for under-cabinet task lights would be a series of puck lights, which are shallow spotlights only two inches in diameter.

Over a kitchen island, Randall usually installs a series of pendant hung fixtures, which are decorative fixtures and also a source of ambient light. "Ambient light," he says, "softens the shadows on people's faces."

A low-voltage accent light with just the right beam spread can highlight a work of art. In his own kitchen, Randall also retrimmed the recessed fixtures over the high counter separating the kitchen from the hallway. "They now are low-voltage adjustable fixtures that illuminate the flowers and art in the hallway, creating visual punch," he explains.

The result, as shown in the accompanying photos, is a kitchen that excites and invites — a dramatic showplace for family, friends and potential customers.



The before and after photographs of Randall Whitehead's own remodeled kitchen demonstrate how a rather bland white kitchen became dramatic and inviting with the use of a good lighting plan, including low-voltage fixtures. The remodeling contractor was HCL Construction, Greenbrae, Calif. (Courtesy of Dennis Anderson)