

Randall Whitehead interviewed for the New York Times, January 3, 2008



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Room to Improve

By TIM McKEOUGH

Q. What kind of lighting should I install in my home theater?

A. In most people's homes, the media room is a multifunctional space used not only for watching movies and TV, but also for entertaining guests or reading in a quiet corner. Fixtures and controls that allow the levels of illumination to be adjusted in different areas of the room are essential.

Randall Whitehead, a San Francisco lighting designer and the author of "Residential Lighting: A Practical Guide" (John Wiley and Sons, 2004), identified four basic categories of lighting used in most rooms: ambient, task, accent and decorative.

Accent fixtures spotlight objects like artworks, and decorative fixtures add a sense of style, Mr. Whitehead said.

In a home theater, ambient and task lighting are particularly important.

“Ambient light is a soft, general illumination that allows people to feel welcomed into a space,” he said. “The best ambient light really comes from light bounced off the ceiling.” Good choices include fixtures recessed in coves around the perimeter of a ceiling (if you’re looking for an architectural solution) or wall sconces and floor lamps that direct light upward. Pochette Wall Sconces by Flos (\$236 each at ylighting.com or 866-428-9289) would work well.

“In a home theater space, you also want to have enough light to read your TV Guide and see where your snacks are,” Mr. Whitehead said. The optimum task light will be aimed somewhere between your eyes and the reading material, so your head doesn’t create shadows.

“A nice pharmacy lamp — a floor lamp that comes over the arm of your chair or sofa that projects light down — gives you light where you need it,” Mr. Whitehead said. One example is Crate and Barrel’s Pharmacy Floor Lamp (\$179; 800-967-6696 or crateandbarrel.com).

By wiring numerous circuits to a single control, you can adjust various light sources and dim them for a movie. You can also set different “scenes” of light — one for everyday living, one for entertaining, one for movies, and so on.

Grade Architecture & Interiors in New York recently used one such system, Lutron’s Grafik Eye 3000 series (from \$435 at www.unionlighting.com or 800-839-9001), to manage lighting in a media room designed as part of a loft renovation in Tribeca, above.

“It’s actually the clients’ family room as well as their home theater, so it needed to be tastefully done,” said Tom Hickey, an architect and partner at Grade, who designed the project with another partner, Edward Yedid. The architects not only created settings that allowed for dramatically

different moods, but also installed a projection screen that retracts when not in use. “When the screen is up, it doesn’t look like a home theater,” Mr. Hickey said. “We also used decorative fixtures, like modern table lamps,” to make the space more inviting.

Of course, if you just want to be able to dim a ceiling fixture with some style come movie time, there are less expensive options. Lutron’s Maestro IR dimmer (\$34.45 at unionlighting.com) can replace a wall switch, and allows you to control the brightness of a single circuit with an infrared wireless remote, changing levels with an appealing controlled fade. In that configuration, task and accent lighting have to be operated the old-fashioned way: by hand.

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