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DRESSING UP THE LIGHTING FOR TRADITIONAL HOMES AND GARDENS

By Randall Whitehead

The techniques of lighting have greatly evolved beyond simple table lamps and chandeliers, yet many homeowners have not updated their thinking much beyond this approach. So much of what we see in current design magazines and books are the ultra modern, ultra clean interiors. It's true that progressive design is a hot topic, but it's not for everyone. How does the owner of a more traditionally styled house make use of today's lighting techniques? Can new lighting techniques be applied to non cutting edge spaces to enhance the sense of warmth and comfort that these cozy interiors inspire?

The answer is a resounding...yes

The trick is to keep the lighting upgrades subtle so that the decorative light sources can remain the architectural jewelry for a home. Chandeliers and table lamps are an important element to most all styles of residences. They are needed to provide the ambiance for a room without necessarily providing all the necessary illumination on their own. This applies outside of a home as well. Adding a layer of accent lights, hidden among the plantings, allows the lanterns at the front door and by the garage to provide the illusion of providing the main light without visually overpowering the landscaping.

Sometimes residential lighting design takes a backseat to wondrous commercial projects as far as eye catching design goes. Lighting for homes needs to be more subtle than what goes into public spaces. A restaurant or theater project can dive headfirst into the realm of fantasy design. Patrons want to be transported to a place that is a different world than what they experience at home. Yet, when homeowners are in their personal spaces they want to be able to have various levels of functional illumination for the mundane, but ever so important tasks, that are a part of day-to-day living.

Lighting can be a tremendous force. It's the one factor that makes all the other elements in design work together. Yet it has for so long been the last thing considered and the first item cut from budget. The result has left many homes drab, uncomfortable, and dark. Too often the blame goes elsewhere, when improper lighting is the true culprit. Becoming better acquainted with the components of good lighting will allow homeowners to communicate their needs more clearly with the sales staff in lighting showrooms and the contractors whom they have hired to do the installation.

Light has four specific duties. They are to provide *decorative*, *accent*, *task*, and *ambient* illumination. No one light source can perform all the functions of lighting required for a specific space. Understanding what these terms mean will help homeowners make better decisions that will integrate illumination into the overall design and give them what they want. Here is a description of these four functions that puts them into terms that can be easily understood by everyone involved:

Decorative light

Light fixtures such as chandeliers, candlestick-type wall sconces, and table lamps work best when they are used to create the sparkle for a room. They alone cannot adequately provide usable illumination for other functions without overpowering the rest of the design aspects of the space. I call them the *supermodels of illuminations*. Their only job is to look fantastic.

For example, a dining room, illuminated only by the chandelier over the table, creates a glare-bomb situation. As you crank up the dimmer to provide enough illumination to see your guests, the intensity of the light source causes everything to fall into secondary importance. This one supernova of uncomfortable bright light eclipses the wall color, the art, the carpeting, and especially the people sitting at the table.

By nature, any bright light source in a room or space immediately draws people's attention. They won't see all the other elements, no matter how beautiful or expertly designed. For example, linen shades on table lamps draw too much attention to themselves when they are the only light source in a room. Consider using a shade with an opaque liner and possible a perforated lid to help direct the illumination downwards over the base, the tabletop and across your lap for reading. We'll cover this in a little more detail in the section on task lighting below.

Accent light

Accent light is directed illumination that highlights objects within an environment. Light sources such as track and recessed adjustable fixtures are used to bring attention to art, sculpture, tabletops and plantings. Just like any of the four functions, accent light cannot be the only source of illumination in a room. If you use only accent light, you end up with the museum effect, where the art visually takes over the room, while the guests fall into darkness. Subconsciously, the people will feel that the art is more important than they are.

Good accent lighting thrives on subtlety. A focused beam of light directed at an orchid or highlighting an abstract painting above a primitive chest can create a marvelous effect. People won't notice the light itself; they see only the object being illuminated. The lighting effect achieves its magic through its very invisibility.

In the movies, if we can tell how a special effect has been achieved, we feel cheated. We don't want to know, because we want to think it's magic. In lighting, it should be no less the case. We want to see the effects of light, but the method needs to remain unseen. That subtlety is what will give the design a cohesive wholeness, allowing the architecture, the furnishings and the landscape to become the focus in a particular space, not the decorative fixtures or the bulbs glaring out from within them.

Task light

This is illumination for performing work-related activities in the home, such as reading, cutting vegetables, and sorting laundry. The optimal task light is located between your head and your work surface. That's why illumination coming from above isn't a good source of task light, because your head casts a shadow onto your book, computer keyboard, or recipe book.

Table lamps with solid shades often do the very best job for casual reading, because they better direct the light

and don't visually overpower the room when turned up to the correct intensity for the job at hand. Fluorescent or incandescent linear shelf lights too, are a good source of task illumination at a desk with a shelf located above the work surface or in the kitchen when mounted under the overhead cabinets.

Ambient light

Ambient light is the soft, general illumination that fills the volume of a room with a glow of light, and softens the shadows on people's faces. It is the most important of the four functions of light, but is often the one element that is left out of the design of a room or space.

The best ambient light comes from sources that bounce illumination off the ceiling and walls. Such light fixtures as opaque wall sconces, torches, indirect pendants and cove lighting can provide a subtle general illumination without drawing attention to the light source. You could call it the *open-hearth effect*, where the room seems to be filled with the light of a glowing fire.

Just filling a room with table lamps is not an adequate source of illumination. The space winds up looking like a lamp shade showroom. Let these lamps be a decorative source, creating little islands of light. Using opaque shades and perforated metal lids, as was mentioned earlier, can turn these fixtures into more effective reading lights (task lights) if that is their main purpose.

Utilizing other sources to provide the necessary ambient light lets the decorative fixtures create the illusion of illuminating the room, without dominating the design. This inclusion of an ambient light source works only if the ceiling is light in color. A rich plum colored ceiling in a Victorian-style dining room or a dark wooden ceiling in a cabin retreat would make indirect light sources ineffective, because the dark surfaces absorb light instead of reflecting it.

In situations such as these the solution may be to lighten the color of the ceiling. Yes, what I am saying here is that sometimes the answer is to alter the environment rather than change the light source. Instead of the whole ceiling being eggplant-colored, how about painting a wide border in that color with the rest of the ceiling done in a cream color or similar hue? A wooden ceiling could be washed with an opaque stain that gives it a more weathered look without taking away from the wood feel itself, as simple painting would do. In both cases, using a chandelier or pendant fixture with a hidden indirect source could provide the much needed ambient light while maintaining a traditional look.

Ambient light, too, just like the other three functions, should not be used by itself. What you end up with is the *cloudy day effect*, where everything is of the same value, without depth or dimension. Ambient light alone is a flat light. It is only one component of well-designed lighting.

Light layering, the bottom line

A lighting design is successful when these four functions of light are layered within a room to create a fully usable, adaptive space. Good lighting does not draw attention to itself, but to the other design aspects of the environment. An entryway, for example, desperately needs ambient and accent light, but may not need any task light, because no work is going to be done in the entry. However, there may be a coat closet, which would need some task-oriented illumination. The addition of a ceiling mounted decorative fixture helps set the tone for the rest of the house.

What we often see in various design magazines is a house lighted for entertaining only. It is a very dramatic, glitzy look. Every vase, painting, sculpture and ashtray glistens in its own pool of illumination. Yet, the seating area remains in darkness. What are these people going to do for light when they want to go through the mail, do their taxes, or put a puzzle together with their kids?

In reality, people entertain only part of the time. The rest of the time these rooms are used to do homework, clean, and interact with other family members or guests. This doesn't mean that you should eliminate accent lighting. Just don't make it the only option. Simply putting ambient light on one dimmer and accent lighting on another provides a whole range of illumination level settings. Don't forget to add a layer of task light and decorative light to the mix as well.

If once the installation is done and someone walks in and says, "Oh, you put in track lighting, it means that the lighting system itself is the first thing seen which kind of defeats the purpose. If they walk in and say, "You look great!" or "Is that a new painting?" then you know the lighting is successfully integrated into the overall room design and that you have done a good job.



photo: Dennis Anderson

This family room uses a pendant fixture by Lightspann to offer both decorative and ambient light, while recessed adjustable low voltage fixtures by Lucifer Lighting add a layer of accent lighting.



photo: Dennis Anderson

This beautiful alabaster pendant by JH Lighting draws people to the table while adding a wonderful glow of flattering indirect lighting. Recessed low voltage fixtures by Lucifer lighting add a visual punch to the art.



photo: Dennis Anderson

Pendant fixtures by Lightspann help create a more human scale for this living room. Low voltage tracks, mounted along the apex beam, create the much needed accent lighting.



photo: Dennis Anderson

A series of four fluorescent pendants by Flos give both fill lighting and a decorative element to this kitchen. Warm colored fluorescent puck lights by Tresco International provide task lighting along the countertops.



photo: Dennis Anderson

Subtle lighting from above creates a dappled pattern of light and shadow for this intimate garden.

Randall Whitehead [mailto:rdw@randallwhitehead.com] has written seven books on the subject of lighting design. His latest book is *Residential Lighting, A Guide to Beautiful and Sustainable Design*. All of Randall's books can be ordered at Book Masters by calling 800.247.6553 or via email order@bookmasters.com [mailto:order@bookmasters.com] . Samples of his work, books, and video clips can be seen on his website www.randallwhitehead.com [http://www.randallwhitehead.com] .

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