



Entrances, Setting the Tone

By Randall Whitehead

Just as we judge people by our first impressions, so do we judge homes by what we see and how we feel in the entryway. Entrances are not often given much thought, but it is important to set just the right mood and tone. The correct lighting affects the way people respond to a space, as well as where their attention will be drawn.

Outside, in the evening as guests approach a house, the lighting should provide an eye-catching, welcoming feel, as well as security. You will also need to give specific cues showing which way to approach and enter. Be sure to light the house number.

Inside the home, ambient illumination should surround the entry with welcoming light. Fill light is especially important in this area. People need a gentle glow of illumination to help them feel at ease in a new

surrounding. This complimentary light also allows the homeowners to look their best when greeting people. Good ambient light in the entry will help transform what is often an awkward moment into a more comfortable and enjoyable encounter. Entry lighting can also energize a person's impression of a home. Highlighting a dramatic painting, sculpture, or architectural detail can help guests feel at once both welcomed and impressed.

People respond to what they sense, not always to what is real. A room can be made to look large, airy, and open, or cozy, when the reality may actually be quite the opposite. Too often, an entrance in a home is restricted in space, but with lighting and related design techniques, the space can be subtly transformed into a vastly more welcoming place.

Illusion

Not all lighting solutions directly involve the use of lighting luminaires — or fixtures. Mirrors, for instance, can be used to create the illusion of greater space or light. Mirroring one wall can make a room seem to expand in size. Mirrors will keep wall areas located farthest from the windows from falling into darkness or seeming less important.

Entries come in all shapes and sizes. Lighting can help you redefine the envelope of the space. Do you want the entry to look larger, or more intimate? Do you want a look that dazzles, or one of homey comfort? How about a combination of both? It is possible. For example, in a cramped entry area, you can often use illusion and lighting to “steal” part of another room. In addition to using mirrors, you might consider installing glass block, or directing an accent light onto a sculpture, flower arrangement or painting in an adjacent area to visually make it a part of the small entry.

Stairways in an entry area can provide additional opportunities for expansiveness. Illuminated, they make the room seem larger and provide another focus for the guest’s attention upon entering the home. Lighting a painting mounted on the wall along the stairway or illuminating plants or a sculpture on a stair landing, can also help a small entry assume the appearance of a grander entrance hall.



Switching and dimming systems can take the same entry that was made to look huge and dramatic for a big party or event and instantly transform it into a cozy and intimate greeting area for small, friendly gatherings. Lighting can—and should—be that flexible.

With an integrated dimming system, homeowners can create whatever kind of setting they would like. There’s nothing wrong with making the house seem foreboding when uninvited guests stop by, or having the lights go to full brightness when it’s time for guests to depart.

Lighting that is directed towards the ceiling helps open up a space and makes it feel larger and, at the same time, friendly and inviting. Illumination pointed down onto the floor makes an

entry seem smaller because the darkened ceiling feels lower. Adding accent light to a darkened space creates highly dramatic settings. Accent light, layered with ambient light, provides a friendly environment with a bit of visual punch.

Too often entries end up looking unintentionally dark and uninviting, even if elegantly decorated. Usually it’s because the addition of ambient light has not even been considered. Either it was omitted entirely, or the walls and ceiling may be too dark for indirect light to be reflected and diffused effectively throughout the space. If the lighting does not adequately light the ceiling, it not only makes the room seem small, but also neglects what often can be wonderful decorative elements in a design. Beams, coffers, moldings, ceiling frescoes and other well-lit design components can become marvelous welcoming details. These architectural details give people something to engage their interest as they enter and help enlarge the feel of the room by expanding the space visually upwards. For parties, entrances can serve as auxiliary gathering spots when they are properly lit for people’s comfort.



Planning

It’s essential that you take lighting needs into consideration at the beginning of the design stage because additions later will cost much more than adding appropriate lighting touches at the front end of a project. A common approach to lighting an entry is to put a decorative luminaire, such as a chandelier, in the center of a ceiling as the only source of illumination. If this is your design choice, then the bottom of an entry or hall pendant should be a minimum of 6’8” off the floor.

As a result, this one luminaire draws all the attention. Art, ceiling details and flower arrangements fall into secondary importance. The homeowners, as they greet guests, will end up in silhouette, which does not give them a flattering appearance. This is when “light layering” comes into play. For example, think about installing a source of ambient light, so that an existing chandelier can be dimmed to a subtle sparkle.

Daylight also should be integrated into the design of an entry, if possible. Use available windows or add windows or skylights to provide some or all of the ambient light during daylight hours.

Ambient Lighting

One option for the ambient light would be to install a pair of wall sconces flanking an art piece to provide the necessary glow of illumination. Translucent versions may draw too much attention to themselves; opaque-bottom sconces (made of metal, bisque or plaster) will cast light upwards, softening the shadows on faces and filling the entry with a pleasing glow of illumination.

A rule of thumb: Mount opaque wall sconces above eye level, normally six to six-and-a-half feet above the finished floor. This applies to eight- or nine-foot ceilings. When working with a higher ceiling, the luminaire can be mounted higher. Do not mount the luminaire closer than two feet from the ceiling; otherwise there'll be a hot spot above the sconce.

A second possible source of ambient lighting is the torchiere (a floor lamp that throws light upward). If electrical outlets are already available, then an electrician is not needed. Torchieres are the quickest and easiest way to add ambient light. Remember to choose a luminaire with a solid reflector-type shade that provides uplight only. Otherwise attention will be drawn away from the other more interesting aspects of the entry. A half-switched receptacle will allow you to turn on the torchiere using a wall switch instead of turning it on at the luminaire itself. A more architecturally integrated solution to the question of ambient light would be to install cove lighting, a linear light source hidden behind moldings to uplight the ceiling along the perimeter of the entry. In new construction, this is an inexpensive addition to overall building cost. When remodeling, this could be the costliest and most labor-intensive of the ambient lighting solutions.

Lastly, you could substitute an opaque-housing, pendant-hung, indirect luminaire in place of a chandelier to create the necessary fill light. This would eliminate the source of sparkle, so you could install translucent or candlestick-type wall sconces on either side of the art as the sparkle of light for the entry. Decorative wall sconces are normally mounted at five-and-a-half to six feet on center (centerline of the junction box) above the finished floor.

Accent Lighting

After choosing decorative and ambient light, consider accent lighting. A common choice for accent lighting is track lighting, but it is generally not the best solution. For some rooms it may be the only feasible choice because of the architecture or cost, but track lighting is visually intrusive and makes people feel as though they're on stage.

When possible, recessed adjustable luminaires mounted in the ceiling are the better solution. These can be directed to particular spots that need highlighting, and are much more low profile. Even in an existing home, recessed luminaires, made especially for remodeling, can often

be installed within a reasonable budget and with minimal mess. Always hire a professional electrician to get the job done properly.

What about recessed downlights?

The big question here is: What is the best use of downlights? The worst place to use downlights is over seating areas. They cause hard, unflattering shadows on people's faces, making them look tired and older than their true age. Who wants that? Fixed downlights should only be installed over stationary objects, such as immovable sculptures, niches, or planters built into the architecture.

Please avoid straight downlights. They don't give the flexibility needed to highlight different sizes, shapes and mounting heights as you add or rearrange furnishings. A straight downlight offers very few options and limits your choices. On the other hand, don't go crazy with recessed adjustable luminaires and fill the entire ceiling with holes, often referred to as the “planetarium” effect. You needn't light everything in a room.

Can halogen lamps be used for downlights? Yes, but understand that in magazines, we constantly see rooms filled with a series of recessed downlights casting light in circles on the floor. Their intended purpose is to provide ambient illumination. Downlights, no matter what lamp is used, are a poor source of fill light, because of the shadows they cast and the absence of light to reflect back toward the ceiling. Use other sources, such as wall sconces or cove lighting for the ambient lighting. Use adjustable downlights for accent lighting.

The Bottom Line

Be sure to hide light sources as much as possible. Let what is being highlighted come into focus, not the luminaires themselves. Well-designed lighting can create an inviting and impressive entryway.

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