

Bright Ideas

Shedding light on how to illuminate your home

How do I start planning a lighting scheme?

Draw a floor plan of each room to indicate the location of the furniture. Think about the activities you'll be doing in the space that require light—reading in a favorite armchair, dining with family and friends, preparing meals on the kitchen counter. Consider any objects in the room, such as artwork, that should be lighted, and determine the appropriate mood you want to establish in the room—dramatic, intimate, relaxed or formal.

Once you've decided where to put the light, test your ideas by experimenting with a utility or table lamp. Shine it from a stepladder to get the effect of a ceiling fixture. Then enlist a lighting designer or an electrician to help figure out what types of fixtures to buy and install.

What does a lighting designer do?

Much like an interior designer, a lighting designer analyzes your room plans, the activities performed in those spaces and your décor, and then recommends an overall strategy and specific lighting fixtures. A lighting designer is usually knowledgeable about the latest trends and technology and can save you time and money in the long run. Some lighting designers have a formal education in lighting design while others have learned through on-the-job training. Both the International Association of Lighting Designers (www.iald.org) and the American Lighting Association (www.americanlightingassoc.com) require their members to pass an exam to qualify for certification, and can put you touch

with local designers who charge a fixed or an hourly fee to develop drawings and lists of equipment.

I'm not sure how much light I need or where to put it.

The best way to start is by taking an inventory of daily activities that take place in each space of your home. Work areas in the kitchen, bathroom or home office may require concentrated illumination called task lighting. In living and family rooms, ambient lighting (broadly distributed light that usually emanates from fixtures in the ceiling), may be sufficient. Within all these spaces, accent lighting may be installed to highlight objects and surfaces for additional sparkle and drama. Other factors to consider are the age and visual acuity of the occupants of the home. Generally, a 55-year-old needs twice as much light as a 20-year-old to see equally as well. The need to reduce energy costs may also be a concern.

What types of lighting fixtures should I use?

Your choice will depend on the room's dimensions and décor and the activities to be illuminated. Decorative lighting is meant to be visible and can include chandeliers, pendants, table lamps, wall sconces and ceiling-mounted fixtures. This type of lighting helps to create a formal atmosphere in a living or dining room. Architectural lighting more subtly illuminates a space, often through indirect sources such as cove lights concealed behind a cornice or a cabinet. Track lighting and recessed spotlights can be used to produce theatrical effects. As in

any design project, personal preferences play a big role in the development of a lighting scheme.

What types of controls should I use?

Think about the atmosphere you want to create. Simple wall switches turn lights on and off to provide basic illumination. Dimmer switches adjust the intensity of the light so you can vary the mood and also save energy. But some light sources, particularly fluorescents, can be difficult and expensive to dim. Infrared and ultrasonic motion sensors turn lights on and off automatically according to movement in a room. Computer-programmed "smart house" systems, which link lights in different rooms to a central control device, offer convenience and security but can be costly.

What should I consider when buying a lamp?

Whether you're buying a table or floor lamp, the style and quality of light are important. First, consider the purpose of the movable fixture. Will it light space to accommodate a specific task, provide general lighting or just brighten up a dark corner? Some floor lamps direct light downward for reading, while others create soft ambient illumination. A torchiere bounces light onto the ceiling, which then is reflected back into the room. Table lamps generally cast light at eye level. In selecting one, make sure you measure the height of the surface on which the lamp will rest, then add the measured height of the lamp. The combined dimensions should be at a comfortable height for reading while seated.

—Deborah K. Dietsch