

Lighting your Way

Illuminating ideas for every room of your log home

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We all have been in homes in which we feel more relaxed and comfortable. Or we have worked in spaces that seem to energize us and spark our productivity. A well lit home is much more than simply selecting and placing fixtures. Once you have a basic grasp of the principles of good lighting design, selecting and placing fixtures becomes a relatively easy task.

Meeting your needs

We speak of rooms using descriptive terms. My clients speak of ‘coziness’ or ‘warmth’. Or they want rooms ‘to be alive’. We judge a room by how we ‘feel’ in it. Beyond the form, shape, colors, and decoration, we want a room to generate a particular feel or mood. In sitting areas, we want to feel cozy, safe and relaxed. In kitchens, we want to be relaxed but energized and productive. We want living rooms to be both vibrant for entertaining and subdued for intimacy. Dramatic spaces can be interesting but can also create tension. To plan how you will light your home, take the first steps of deciding the purpose each room and the mood you want the rooms to evoke at different times.

A Few General Principles

It is important to emphasize that the way color and light work in a room is far more important than the fixtures themselves in creating the environment we want. When you want the activities and people to be the focus, illuminate the horizontal surfaces through a general diffusion of light. When you want to emphasize the architecture and encourage intimacy, use varying light levels. Different vertical surfaces receiving and reflecting varying amounts of light increases contrast and visual interest. As the amount of detail increases, the overall level of light needs to be increased. As the contrast between objects and their background increases and the overall reflectance of surfaces increases, it can be decreased. Because logs are relatively dark, more overall light is usually required in a log home. Color, a function of light, also influences moods. At higher levels of illumination people are more accepting of 'cooler' colors, while at lower levels, they are more accepting of 'warmer' colors.

Making it Happen

In order to achieve the impressions and moods you want for each room, start by breaking down lighting into four general categories: task, ambient, accent and decorative. Task lighting is a relatively high level of light in those areas where specific activities occur. It is uniform and without shadows. Ambient light provides general illumination, fills in shadows and reduces contrast. Accent lighting, considerably brighter than ambient, is directed at specific locations, usually architectural features or points of artistic interest. Decorative lighting is where the fixture, such as a chandelier, is as important as the light itself.

Once the function is determined, decide what type of light source or bulb will best meet the specific need. At this time you might also determine whether the specific bulbs meet your other requirements. For example, what is the expected life of the bulb? Will it be easy to obtain and maintain? What is the replacement cost? How much energy does it consume?

A Walk through your home

At all stages of the design I encourage clients to take an imaginary walk through their home. Sit in different rooms, doing various activities.

The **Foyer** functions as a transition from the exterior environment to the interior. As it is not task-oriented, lighting levels can be lower. In order to create an alluring atmosphere and an immediate sense of peace, ambient light need only be a soft glow across the ceiling. More directed light can create variations of light and shadow and direct the eye to specific points of interest. The more dramatic the lighting, the greater the energy and feeling of elegance.

The many functions that a **living room or great room** performs and its large size means that more than one type or layer of lighting is required. Emphasis is usually on mood, which may range from festive to subdued, with occasional tasks. In particularly large rooms, there are often different functions or areas within the larger room. The amount of light required might vary within each area. For example, a television area requires less lighting; a reading area, specific task lighting; entertaining, a higher level of general light. It is, therefore, very helpful to have a clear idea of the furniture layout prior to lighting. It may be necessary to accurately locate floor outlets for lamps.

Start with the accent lighting. Architectural details, artwork and other displayed items can be directly lit. As these are usually on or near walls, spotlights, whether recessed or track-mounted, can be used. While low-voltage halogens are great for specific points of interest, large areas may be 'washed' with fluorescent tubes mounted behind a valence or in a luminous soffit. Task lighting can be accomplished with movable fixtures or adjustable recessed fixtures. These should be placed so that they can be relocated or redirected if furniture is shifted. Finally, ambient light, often forgotten in living rooms, needs to be integrated. Bouncing light off the ceiling not only enhances the overall feeling of the space but also softens shadows around beams, a common problem with log homes. On the other hand, downlights can make occupants seem older and tired. Wall sconces and additional portable fixtures can also be used for ambient lighting.

While **dining rooms** usually require less overall light, you may choose to accent special displays or use display case lighting. Chandeliers, often a decorative feature, can produce considerable glare. Using recessed lighting as the ambient light can reduce this. With cut glass fixtures, this additional light will highlight the fixture itself.

Kitchens require considerable layering of light. The work surfaces need bright, shadowless light. Mounting fluorescent tubes under the upper cabinets works well. Islands and peninsulas can be lit with track lights or adjustable recessed fixtures. While California requires the ambient lighting to be fluorescent, general lighting can be accomplished in all regions by bouncing light off the ceiling from tubes mounted above the upper cabinets, or by pendant fixtures with compact fluorescent lamps. Low voltage spotlights can provide accent lighting.

In addition to the traditional bedside task lighting, **bedrooms** also require a degree of ambient light. Again, bouncing light off the ceiling or providing wall sconces can help meet the basic requirements. If the bed is placed for TV viewing, bedside lamps need swing arms or shades that reduce or eliminate glare and reflection.

Lighting in **bathrooms** can be more dramatic than for general living spaces, but also needs to function well. In order to surround the face with light, minimizing shadows, adequately space the mirror lights, use a luminous soffit or additional. If recessed downlights are used for ambient lighting, small aperture lights give a better sense of scale. Sconces may do a better job of reducing shadows. Additional accent lighting can shift the emphasis away from the vanity and increase the feeling of spaciousness. Finally, a small portable fixture can be placed on a shelf near the vanity.

If photographs or artwork are displayed in **hallways**, they can be accented with adjustable downlights. Otherwise, sconces can produce variations of light and shadow, increasing visual interest. It is a good idea to light **closets** from within using fluorescent fixtures or low voltage track lights. These can be wired so that they go on when the doors are opened.

Exterior lighting has two main functions. Multiple fixtures with lower light levels reduce contrast and fixture glare, provide a safe and clear path to the entry and a transition from a dark exterior to a bright interior. Accent lighting is particularly striking on a log home. Wall 'grazing', emphasizing the rich texture of log construction, is accomplished by dowlighting or uplighting very close to the wall.

Switching and Control

I encourage clients to do imaginary walkthroughs in all directions, switching on and off lighting in their mind as they go. Reaching and locating switches should be reflexive as you enter and leave rooms. The open floor plans often found in log homes can provide challenges. Several switches may have to be grouped or 'ganged' together at entrances to rooms. I try to limit the maximum number of switches at one location to four. Transition spaces and large rooms may have to be controlled from several locations requiring '3-way' or '4-way' switching. Make sure there is enough room beside doors for as many switches as you need before placing bearing posts, windows, fixtures, appliances or cabinets. If a door swings to the left, the switches would be immediately to the right. I recommend that the switch controlling the general lighting be the first switch. For example, in a bathroom, the first switch would control the ambient light, the next would control the vanity lighting, and the next would control the fan. Maintaining this consistent approach will ensure that as people enter the room they aren't frustrated accidentally switching on the fan.

In kitchens, countertop lighting can be switched with the outlets over the counters. Locate a garbage disposal switch so that it is not confused with the light switches. In addition, switches can be placed on the ends of islands or peninsulas. Make sure your cabinet manufacturer knows of any electrical requirements.

Some clients like to be able to control exterior lighting from their bedside for security purposes. Switching a barrier-free home need not be significantly different other than lower switch heights and making sure outlets are easily accessible.

There are few obstacles to the physical placement of switches and outlets in a log home. They can be placed on a log wall by creating a 'flat' on a log at standard height, then hollowing out or 'mortising' for the boxes themselves. The wiring is run through the logs by a variety of methods. Avoid placing switches and outlets on posts.

I often place a switched outlet on a soffit so Christmas lights can be conveniently controlled. I dedicate a switch for future landscape lighting and a spare for future landscaping.

Using dimmers not only allows tremendous flexibility in influencing the mood of a room but can produce significant energy savings as well. While different types may be required for different current loads, newer dimmers offer presets for different moods and even master controllers that operate more than one switch. While good quality incandescent dimmers are reasonably priced, dimmable ballasts, required for fluorescent lighting, add considerable costs to a your lighting. Your home can be wired so that it can even be controlled from a remote location. This can be advantageous for recreational properties allowing lighting to be altered periodically for security purposes. In addition, room temperature levels can be adjusted prior to arrival at the cottage.

It is clear that with the technology and the variety of lighting sources available today, a little planning can result in a both beautifully and efficiently lit home. Whether you want to curl up in a corner with a good book or entertain friends, you can create spaces that evoke any mood you want.

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