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LIGHT STRATEGY

Robert Truax offers step-by-step solutions for creating environments that glow

BY CAREN KURLANDER

"I never want people to walk into a room and say, 'Great lights!' I just want them to walk in and feel good," says Robert Truax, founder of the Northern California lighting design company Truax Design Group. His skillfulness in achieving that response makes him a favorite of clients, including designers Paul Vincent Wiseman, Michael S. Smith and Rose Tarlow. "Light has the ability to create mood and drama that bring a room to life," says Truax, who points out that all too often the impact lighting can have is overlooked. Here he shares some of his insights on maximizing its potential and notes that, "with great lighting, even an ordinary room can look fabulous."

What does a lighting designer do?

First we sit down with a homeowner or a designer and find out what he or she needs in a space. In a lot of ways it's like lighting a stage. We lay out lighting that will enhance the architecture and the art and make people feel good. We also design a control system. Some homes might have six hundred dimmers to control the lights, and we set them up so that a person can push one button and every light in the house fades to the proper level.

How would you describe the basics of lighting a room?

It depends on the space, but for an entertaining area you want to create depth and a sense of interest with the light. You want your eyes to travel to key objects within the room, so you feature all the special elements in a space. At the same time you balance that by lighting the architecture, such as illuminating the ceilings and putting light down low where people are. With just chandeliers and table lamps, the room is flat, but once you start adding some spotlights here and there, the room takes on a whole new dimension.

What are the most common requests you get from clients?

One of the most important tasks I have is lighting an art collection. Art has to be washed extremely evenly, with no shadows. But another thing that's really important to people is the lighting in their bathrooms. Clients will say, "I want you to light my bathroom so it's bright and I can see my face. I don't want to look ghoulish."

How should you light a bathroom?

You don't want harsh shadows on the face, and downlights create harsh shadows. The best thing you can do is put up a couple of decorative wall sconces or linear wall sconces that light the sides of the face.

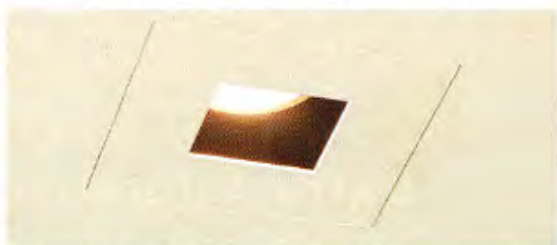


"Lighting brings the magic into a room," Robert Truax says of this important design element.

left: The clean lines of Phoenix Day's Glass Cylinder Pendant work well for Truax.

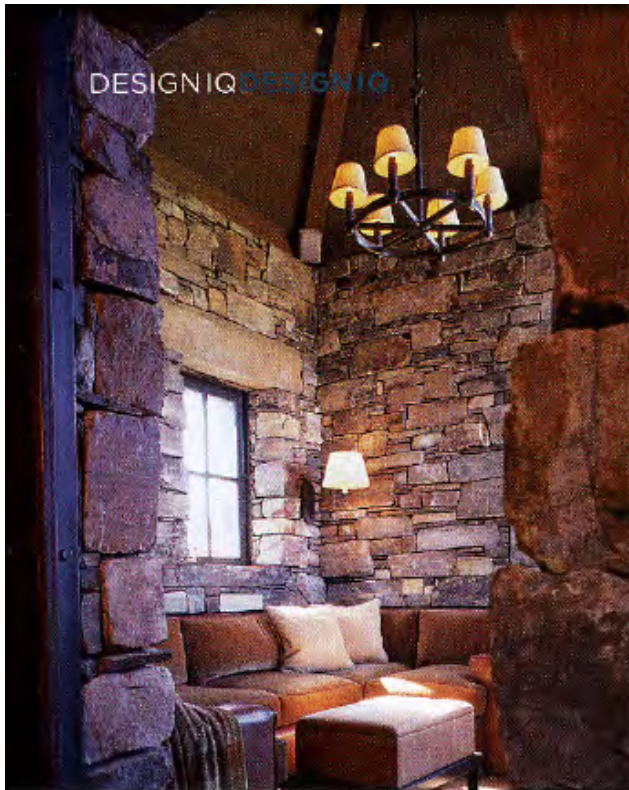


above: For a Hawaii project by designer Paul Vincent Wiseman, Truax used downlights to create an even wash across a large-scale artwork. above right: Fixtures from Holly Hunt, including Vergil's Lantern, are a Truax favorite.



A recessed light from Truax's new line, No. Eight Lighting.

TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF PHOENIX DAY; TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF TRUAX DESIGN GROUP; CENTER LEFT: © MARK DARLEY/ESTO; CENTER RIGHT: COURTESY OF HOLLY HUNT; BOTTOM: COURTESY OF TRUAX DESIGN GROUP



above: Three lighting layers create a flattering mood in a Montana retreat by Cottle Graybeal Yaw Architects and designer Luis Ortega. below left: A versatile Phoenix Day swing-arm fixture.



above right: Truax often relies on Boyd Lighting's Presidio ceiling fixture by Barbara Barry. left: Track lighting from Translite Sonoma offers an alternative to recessed lights.

What makes for flattering light in general?

Low-level light, the warm light that people gravitate toward. That might be a table lamp and maybe a chandelier for soft light up on the ceiling and maybe architectural lighting that singles out specific pieces. Three layers in a room can create a very flattering space.

Do you find that most rooms are overlit?

Oh, yeah. You want to dim everything down to a nice, pleasing mood. For table lamps with a translucent shade, a seventy-five-watt lightbulb is plenty.

What is the best way to light a kitchen?

Because people spend so much time entertaining in their kitchens today, they want bright lights, but they also want us to provide lighting for a task. So we light the stove and spotlight the counters, and we provide a light source that throws gentle light everywhere so that clients can still see into their cabinets.

How do you light a bedroom?

People want to be able to read in bed, and that's really important. That's achieved with either a very small local downlight in the ceiling or a lamp at bedside. We also use something that can swing over the shoulder and get close to the book, or a gooseneck lamp that you'd see in business class on an airplane. People want to be able to control the light source so that it lights the book for only one person.

Do you light exterior spaces and landscapes as well?

Yes, and our objective is to make the outdoor area feel like the moon is lighting everything. We put very small light sources in the trees, then shine them down through the branch structure to create a pattern on the lawn. We also upright trees to create depth and provide path lighting around the garden.

Do people still use track lighting?

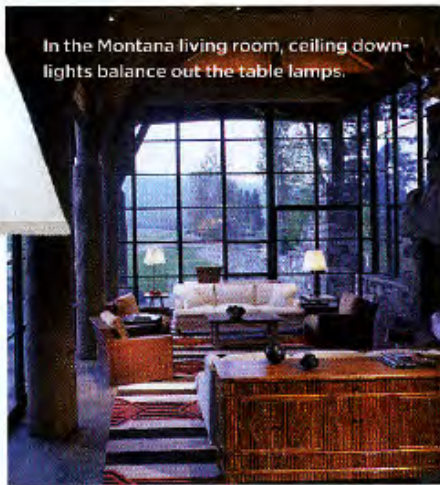
Definitely. And there's a whole new generation of it that looks like jewelry. The nice thing about track lighting is that it's flexible. You can add more tracks if you need them, and you can remove them if you don't. For someone who doesn't want to cut holes in the ceilings for new recessed lights, track lighting is a good way to go.

What about fluorescent lighting?

I respect it because we need to think about it in terms of energy conservation. Fluorescent uses about two-thirds less energy than an incandescent lightbulb, and if you use the correct fluorescent tubes, you can get really good color.

Do people know when the lighting is bad?

I think they know. We get called in all the time when clients buy a house and think it's perfect. Then they move in and turn the lights on at night, and the house looks horrible. Lighting is the afterthought. So I can't stress enough: Bring somebody in early! +



In the Montana living room, ceiling downlights balance out the table lamps.



One way to make a space feel larger is to borrow from the view outside. For the Montana house, Truax lit the exterior and the trees near the windows so that they would be visible at night.