

Let There Be

Light

By Mark Oxley

Highlighting the right pool features and plantings works wonders in setting a spectacular evening scene—complete with a bonus: a peaceful reflection.

When illumination professionals think of design, they think of creating an evening outdoor room—one filled with just the right amount of effective lighting. Used to enhance, change, set the tone or simply add drama, outdoor lighting magically transforms. Creating visual delights and practical solutions in and around the pool and its setting results in a spectacular

scene that comes alive with light. The ultimate outdoor room is a poolscape—with the pool as its focus.

A poolscape can be compared to an indoor dining room. Take a moment to envision this analogy. Imagine the dining table as the pool, the dining chairs as seating areas, and wall hangings and decorative items giving elegance or whimsy to the immediate space. While walls

define the room's near perimeter, there may be windows or doors gesturing to distant visual destinations.

Center attention on the dining table, or, rather, the pool. Is it elegant or casual? Linear or curved? Traditional or contemporary? Like the ornamentation on a dining table, the lighting in a pool should complement the character of its overall design.

Think about *location*—consider the region of the country where the pool is installed. Cutting-edge advances in lighting design may be more prevalent in the western or southern US than in the eastern regions. The *shape* of the pool is a notable factor, as curvilinear pools require more land analysis than rectangular ones. The *color* of the pool's interior finish also influences lighting decisions. For

Photo courtesy of Star Pools



Photographer, Bill Reeves

Uplights on the wall create a visual destination, while nearby downlights help welcome evening diners.



Photo courtesy of Michale Landscape Design

Downlights from the pergola epitomize functional illumination.

instance, how will the color rendering of the lamp be represented? Also, take into account the *texture* of the pool's interior. Different lighting sources can produce a variety of shadow effects based on the nature of the surface material, which can sometimes highlight subtle imperfections.

The pool should be well-lit, yet impart a feeling of ambiance. To minimize glare, pool designers often use 100-watt lamps, placed in a rhythmic pattern on the

same walls. If a rectangular pool is placed at a vertical angle away from the house, the 100-watt lights may be placed in opposite rows on each of the longer walls. Some pool designers prefer 500-watt lamps placed on the wall of the pool closest to the house.

Beyond Conventional Lamps

Recent advances in new technologies offer a variety of alternatives to the traditional pool light. Fiber optics employ end-emitting or side-emitting fiber-optic cables, transmitting light from a remotely located high-intensity discharge (HID) light box. Side-emitting fiber-optic lighting can be installed in a niche in the wall of the pool or under the pool's coping. Fiber-optic applications can generate a soft and uniform lighting effect. End-emitting fiber-optic cables can be strategically placed throughout the pool's bottom to fashion whimsical points of light in patterns that resemble constellations.

Light-emitting diodes (LEDs) are another emergent technology in outdoor illumination and are now available in submerged lighting. LEDs are like tiny light bulbs that fit easily into an electric circuit. Many pool owners choose them over incandescent bulbs because they neither get hot nor do they have a filament to burn out.

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Landscape architect, H. Paul Davis; photographer, Roger Foley

Shadows through delicate leaves and limbs enhance a classical moonlight effect.

From the Light of the Moon

Knowing where pool owners spend most of their time while outdoors at night is important. Will they be relaxing, swimming or entertaining? This is something to keep in mind when establishing the atmosphere.

The submerged fixtures in the pool should produce a hint of illumination on the surrounding deck, but in order to achieve an atmosphere of comfort and safety, additional lighting is often required. Instead of lighting the pool deck directly, angle light toward surrounding beds, letting it spill onto the deck.

Like the illumination from the sun and the moon, the most natural form of lighting comes from above. If a tree canopy hangs over the pool deck, moonlighting (otherwise known as downlighting) can create a mystical effect. Tree-mounted fixtures should be at least 30 feet above the ground, with soft tones filtering through delicate limbs or lacey leaves to evoke subtle shadowing on the beds and walkways below. Shadowing through large limbs is not recommended. It is better to mount a fixture on a stable tree limb than on the trunk.

Large hardwoods, such as oak, beech and maple, have much to offer. Seek out trees with interesting architecture. If these trees are dramatically lit and close enough to the

pool, turn off the pool lighting and enjoy the tree's tranquil reflections on the water. A combination of uplighting and downlighting on trees will result in a natural grounded effect.

If there are no large trees near the pool deck, fixtures can be mounted on pergolas, arbors and even from the eaves of the house. Avoid severe angles and do not point lights toward seating areas.

Lighting Axioms

- Soft light evokes a romantic mood; brighter light creates excitement.
- Uplighting is generally brighter than downlighting.
- Ask the design professional about dimmers; many outdoor fixtures can be dimmed.
- Shadows in the pool should be limited, particularly around submerged benches or steps.
- Lighting should be so subtle that it is not noticeable—until it is turned off!

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Photographer, Reger Foley

Dramatic uplighting and subtle downlighting summon the eye to the ornamental trees. The black bottom pool adds the finishing mirror touch.

The Elegance of Uplighting

Soft, understated uplighting adds a touch of class to any setting. Smaller ornamental trees, such as crape myrtle, amelanchier, Japanese maple, styrax or birch—even ornamental palm—can be excellent candidates for uplighting. With complex limb structures, the evening sight of these beauties can be enjoyed year-round.

Consider creating a wall of light using a series of visually appealing trees. The trees do not need to be on the edge of the property, they may be relatively close to the pool deck, thereby narrowing the view to the immediate area. When creating walls of light along the far perimeters, bridge the unlit areas between the immediate pool deck and the distant elements with some other delicate form of lighting. A general rule of thumb is that the brightest lighting should be the most distant.

Grazing is a technique which essentially points straight up, usually from six to 18 inches away from its subject. It is used most often to highlight the texture of stone, stucco or brick walls. On the other hand, washing employs a broader flood that is set back farther and directed at the wall, creating an even, less textured effect.

Lighting Paths and Steps

Path lighting is a much smaller version of downlighting. This popular fixture treatment displays streams of light along walkways, steps and beds. Be careful not to overuse path lights; less is more. While it is important to light steps and walkways, remember that not all walkways will be used at night.

Another way to light stairs is via step lights. They can be built-in during the creation of walls and stairs or surface-mounted after construction. These types of light can be more productive if they are placed on cheek walls (walls adjacent to stairwells) rather than in the risers of steps. For surface-mounted fixtures, consider using deck lights similar to those mounted on the posts of wooden decks.

Additional Choices

Lighting a variety of visual destinations gives the poolscape more aesthetic appeal. Enhancing sculptural trees, a secluded gazebo or a striking waterfall or fountain with a touch of light offers a compelling view. It is best to capture water features in motion.

If there is a walkway not used at night, lighting it can create a mysterious visual effect. When highlighting flowers, be aware that landscape lighting can result in a largely



Photographer, Wayne Hill

Path lights safely lead the way to the center-of-attention waterfall.

black and white effect, muting most brilliant colors.

When choosing additional elements of interest, be careful of composition. Too many small objects may make a scene appear busy. Likewise, too many different sizes can throw it out of proportion and affect other objects in view. Light and darkness need to be balanced.

The bottom line? Proceed with caution. If everything is lit, then essentially nothing is lit! ♦

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