

Landscape Lighting is a Journey

Landscape lighting is a journey. Or at least it should be. My journey began, as did many others, in the stage and studio lighting arena. Very technical, dramatic lighting - it was there that I learned the fundamentals of light and how to apply them. Many come to landscape lighting through irrigation, and some through electrical contracting. Others start their journey from a landscape construction environment or a horticulture background. Some travel really fast, skipping a few stops along the way; others take a slow, meandering route. While some others stop early on in their journey, at a place where they find the most comfort. Regardless of your starting or ending point or how you travel along the path, welcome to the journey.



BY JOHN HIGO
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John Higo has been involved in the landscape lighting business for over 20 years, the past six as General Manager for Illumicare Group Limited. Having a background in both theatrical lighting and landscape construction, John brings a unique blend of creative and technical experience to the industry. Driven by a passion for quality lighting, and a strong desire to share his knowledge and experience, John has long contributed to the Landscape Ontario Lighting Sector Group, serving as both Chairperson and Provincial Board Representative in the past, as well as teaching lighting courses as part of the Professional Development sessions. A contributing author and current member of the Landscape Lighting Committee for the Illuminating Engineering Society of North America, John has turned his three children into 'lighting snobs', critiquing lighting scenes wherever they go! As an amateur hobby photographer, he enjoys blending his passions, photographing landscape lighting projects for friends and customers whenever he can.

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Photo by Shademaster Landscapes



Most people would agree that landscape lighting adds value, beauty, safety, and security to the property. Even poorly done landscape lighting can (not necessarily) look better than no lighting at all. But make no mistake, there are better ways. Some people start with fixtures - uplights and pathlights scattered throughout the property. This provides some illumination and can look nice. It's a good start. Eventually, they may add some deck and stair lighting, maybe a little downlighting, and eventually may even try their hand at other techniques; adding a silhouette here, a shadow there, and maybe having an opportunity to create a nice mirror effect. Lighting starts to look a little better now, and some creativity begins to brew. It's here that a lot of people pause or even stop. You can create some nice looking projects designing lighting this way. Nice. But there are better ways.

Moving along the path, some creative people start looking for new, innovative ways to use fixtures, beginning the transition from lighting installers to lighting designers! Creating new or unique effects and adding to their repertoire of fixtures and design ideas. Exploring beyond the intended use of a fixture, and reimagining what it can do. Both the tactile and the visual designer have fun with this form, considering the how and the why to use a light in a certain way. I'll give kudos to the professional lighting installers at this juncture, because it is often very difficult to realize a complex design concept in real life. It's fun as a manufacturer to see designers come up with new, innovative ways to use our products. I recall the first time someone used one of our ingrade uplights as a soffit light. First, "Wow! That looks great." Then, "Huh! I hadn't thought of that!" We are often blinded by the intention or purpose and have difficulty looking beyond that. What if I hang this upside down? How would this look mounted sideways? This out-of-the-box thinking often leads to some creative designs and sometimes even new product innovations.

Whether it's the next step in the evolution of the lighting designer or a parallel path along the way, some people begin to venture beyond the fixtures themselves, beyond their uses and installation possibilities. By focusing on the light itself, one

begins to understand how it reflects and is absorbed, how the qualities of light change the way the subject appears, and how to play with and effectively use shadows and highlights. How much of an area or object do I want to cover? Do I want a tight spot, a narrow flood, or a wide spread? How much intensity? Do I want soft and subtle or intense drama? What type of material am I lighting up and how does it react with the light? What if I use different quality of light? This is where you start to get into the emotional aspect of lighting design. Now you've begun to create moods, not just scenes.

The design evolution now complete, one has progressed from merely placing fixtures and throwing light at objects to finding new and exciting ways to use common tools for uncommon effects and has crossed the bridge to a place of enlightenment. One of the very first things I was taught at the beginning of my landscape lighting career was to start with the question, "Why light?" From there, you progress to the "what" and "how" to light. For some, it comes almost instinctually. For others, they have to learn to progress to determine how they want the viewer to feel when walking through the space and viewing a particular vista. I think in order to get there you need to have an emotional connection with your work; both to have the creative mind to conceive how to convey the emotion and to have the drive to get through all of the necessary lessons along the way to finally realize that plateau.

Over the years, I've had the pleasure of watching the metamorphosis of many industry professionals, transitioning from fixture installers to full-on lighting designers – finding the formula to create lighting scenes that set a mood and evoke emotions. And I've seen some stop along the way, happily comfortable creating nice, respectable scenes with which their customers are thrilled. Wherever you are on your journey, whether you stop along the way or endeavor to reach a pinnacle of enlightenment, it comes at a price. You will never be able to pass a lighting job, residential or commercial, and not critique it! It's both a curse and a blessing! 



Photo by Knight Lighting Éclairages



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