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Landscape Lighting: Icing on the Cake

By Erik Skindrud, regional editor



Homeowner Alfred Ford “didn’t want it to be subtle,” project designer Randy Smith said. This view shows the result. Note the two gables on the roof—both are illuminated by a 20-watt Stellar fixture. Photos courtesy Randy Smith, PhD., Entropic Accents Lighting

For many projects, landscape lighting is the final step.

The landscape architect has consulted with the property owner, created the plans and watched as contractors have brought those plans to fruition.

But once the trees, turf and hardscapes are in place, it’s back to the drawing board for a final bit of design work.



The home’s rear façade is prominently lit to match the effect on the front. The Saturn path light fixture at left is casting a bright reflection off the wet pavement.



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The task is setting up the night lighting. Every design team has an idea where it wants to go, but the details will have to wait for actually setting the lights, flipping the switch and fine-tuning the filters and angles.

"It's a lot of fun. It's sort of the icing on the cake," said Dana McClain of McClain Design Group, Inc. in Gainesville, Fla. "It makes everything the architect and the landscape architect do look better. Everything pops out and it adds so much ambiance."

For the past 12 years, McClain, a landscape architect, has collaborated with lighting designer and contractor Randy Smith. Through experience, the pair know how to communicate efficiently—and they know each step of the design process. The sequence starts with McClain meeting with the owner or developer. She and her staff drawn up the landscape construction plans. Smith helps design and complete the irrigation portion of the project while McClain meets with the owner or developer throughout the process to iron out details. Then Smith returns to set up a display, or demonstration, lighting. McClain will then meet Smith (and the property owner or developer) on site to review the layout and make final suggestions.



One of the six downlights illuminating the six gazebo pillars is visible at the right of the photo. The rear of the house is brightly lit and reflects off the pool's still water in this view.

The Collaborative Process

The lighting portion usually proceeds rapidly.

"Randy's got a very good eye as to where to put the lights," McClain said recently. "When we're designing we are looking forward to the lighting—we are keeping it in mind. But we have to set up the display to make final adjustments."

That's where the fun part, the icing on the cake comes in.

"We all sort of stand back and look at each part individually," McClain explains. "Then we go inside the residence and see how it looks from the inside looking out. It's a team effort."



The view from the home's rear window is channeled across the pool to the gazebo and the lighted statue, which reflects off the pool's surface. Like all photos accompanying this article, the image was taken with a digital camera set on a tripod.

The relative ease of installation the team experiences has much to do with Randy Smith's two-plus decades of

experience in the business of landscape contracting and lighting design. Also based in Gainesville, Fla., he runs two companies: Entropic Landscapes, Inc. and Entropic Accents Custom Lightscares. The lighting division has turned into the fastest-growing segment of his business.

Smith gives credit to his use of high-end, solid-bronze fixtures from the California manufacturer Unique Lighting.

“No one else in northern Florida is installing it,” he said recently. “Everybody else is doing the standard stuff.”

The other makers of lighting fixtures would probably debate those claims, but there is agreement on one fact. Low-voltage lighting has come a long way over the past 10 years in terms of quality and reliability.



The gazebo and statue as seen straight-on, across the backyard pool. This is the general view from the home's rear windows. The gazebo dome is made of aluminum but painted a copper tone to match highlights on the house.

Low-voltage Lighting Comes of Age

Since the year 2000, low-voltage lighting is being used on more and more commercial projects, where formerly, only line voltage was used.

“Low-voltage has come a long way,” landscape architect McClain said. “When we first started doing this you needed a lot more transformers, there was a lot more maintenance involved. The new products have changed the way we think about low-voltage. Now we’re using it on commercial and non-residential projects.”

Landscape architect E.J. Bolduc III of Buford Davis & Associates agreed with that assessment.

“You used to be able to tell the difference between line voltage and low voltage,” Bolduc said. “Now most people pull up to a job and wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.”



The front façade is brightly lit with 35-watt uplights that are softened and dispersed with frosted lenses. The open area between the approach and the home highlights the stark contrast.

In 2004, Bolduc teamed up with Smith on a project that challenged the skills of both, and let both explore their creative vision on a big scale. The project was a new home built for Alfred Ford—a great grandson of Henry Ford—on a property at Haile Plantation, a small development outside of Gainesville.

Completed last year, the house sports a French country look, and is set on a two-acre site surrounded by native Florida pines, live oaks and laurel oaks. To this mix, landscape architect Bolduc added a rich mix of magnolias, additional live oaks, cathedral oaks, dogwood and cypress. The dense foliage surrounding the house provided a challenge for the lighting portion of the design. Lighting designer Smith would eventually place close to 200 exterior light fixtures on the property. The lighting system works through 11 transformers and one synchronized control system.

A Spiritual Centerpiece

In addition to the trees and extensive foliage, the lighting design phase had to contend with a large backyard patio area, a glass-windowed greenhouse. Finally, there was a pool between the house and the property's truly unique feature—an ornate gazebo housing one of Alfred Ford's prize art pieces—a large statue of the Hindu god Krishna. (The homeowner is a devotee of the international Krishna Consciousness movement.)



The entrance to this single-story Gainesville, Fla. home is illuminated by a pair of Quasar fixtures on either side of the door, two Gemini wall-mounted lights at the base and several Saturn path lights.

After consulting with Ford, lighting designer Smith knew that the lighting should pay prominent attention to three things—the house, the trees surrounding it and the temple-like gazebo.

“He made it clear at the beginning,” Smith recalled. “He didn’t want the lighting to be subtle—he wanted to show everything off at night. He wanted to create a sense of space by lighting the plant and tree elements around the perimeter. And he wanted the house brightly lit—sort of an embassy look.”

Lighting the statue and gazebo was the most technically demanding part of the job. Smith paid very close attention to the resulting effect on the viewer's eye. For example, the pair of columns facing the house (and most viewers) were lit from the back, so as not to draw attention away from the whole scene. The two columns to the left and right were lit from the side.

“The placement is very specific,” Smith said.



Apollo well lights were placed in custom-drilled holes in the entranceway's marble hardscape. The lights illuminate the brick surfaces on either side of the home's front door.



This surface-mounted puck light guides visitors up the steps leading to the home's front door. The trade name for this fixture is Gemini.



The down light fixture attached to the rain gutter at top is focused on the home's front door. Dubbed the Lunar, the 35-watt fixture is designed to mimic the soft glow of moonlight.

Each of the six columns is downlit with 20-watt halogen bulbs in Unique Comet fixtures (the position varies as described above). Additionally, the top of the gazebo dome and its extensive open filigree work is shown off with a powerful Unique Big Bang fixture with a 35-watt halogen lamp. The final touch on the gazebo area is a pair of uplights illuminating the pair of 20-foot-high date palms that frame the centerpiece on either side.

Off to one side in the backyard, the classic glass greenhouse gets its share of attention with a pair of bright Pulsar bullet lights with their 35-watt lamps. Nearby trees are uplit with Apollo well lights.

Well lights, Smith says, have advantages over bullet lights, even though they require additional work to place correctly.

"A well light doesn't need to be aimed" after it's installed, Smith explains. "But anything on a stake will get kicked by maintenance workers or shift on its own and take time to reposition and re-aim."



Probe bullet lights illuminate shorter trees at the rear of the Ford house. More powerful 35-watt lights are used with the property's bigger pines and oaks.

The “Embassy” Effect

The front and rear of the home are heavily uplit by more well lights. The rear façade, for example, is treated with eight Apollo well lights placed flush into the marble hardscape. Probe bullet lights illuminate the two side wings of the home. (Probes are a step down in power from the Pulsar bullet light—the Probe takes a 20-watt lamp and can be fitted with frosted lenses for a softer effect). A pair of Quasar down lights are also used on the home's rear to safely illuminate the steps that lead down to the hardscape and pool. All the rear façade lamps are paired with frosted lenses to even out the effect.

The Ford residence's front is brightly and directly lit for the “embassy” effect—it is attention-grabbing and dramatic. The centerpiece of the home's front are a pair of mahogany doors that emit a warm red glow as they receive light from two Lunar down lights attached to the second-story rain gutters.



The stake-anchored Probe, seen around the perimeter of this planting area, is a mini bullet fixture and is designed to hide from attention during the day. The light's halogen lamp, or bulb, is rated for 4,000 hours.

Smith is proud of the Ford residence lighting job—its prominently featured on his web site—and he should be proud. With close to 200 fixture elements it represents a big piece of work, including unusual and demanding details like the statue and gazebo. The successful outcome is also the result of collaboration between Smith and E.J. Bolduc. The landscape architect had high praise for the collaborative process, and the way the Smith's detailed and practical knowledge helped him achieve his goals.

“We wanted a hierarchy of light intensity against the building,” he recalled of the design process. “For example, we wanted the front entrance to be brighter than the rest of the front façade. The idea was to create a focal point for the entrance, so there would be no question about where somebody would go to enter once they entered the site.”

Smith, who studied materials science at the University of Florida, seems to have put his PhD. to good use.

“He used a variety of lenses and light placements to achieve that effect,” Bolduc said.



This MR16 halogen bullet light is placed directly into the ground with a seven-inch brass stake attached to the unit. Close to 100 stake-mounted bullet lamps were used on the project with 11 transformers and one synchronized master controller.

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