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"Selling A Portrait of the Home" —It's Not About the Fixtures

By Stephen Kelly, regional editor



The philosophy of the International Academy of Architectural Landscape Lighting is to not just light the landscape but also the architectural features. "It's not about the pretty fixtures, they're just lamp holders," says Jim Ply. "They need to be built well and strong, but we don't want people to see the fixtures. We want them to see the effects of the lighting." Here the Queen palms and Australian tree ferns are aglow from 35-watt Apollos. Their reflected light creates interesting light patterns and shadows for the columned entry.

I've had the pleasure of meeting and speaking at length with Jim Ply, landscape contractor and owner of Oak Crest Landscape in Orange County, Southern Calif. He has over 20 years of professional experience in all facets of landscape design and installation. Mr. Ply's focus these days is low-voltage landscape lighting. His portfolio includes everything from the quaint (but expensive) cottages of Laguna Beach to the multi-million dollar estates of Beverly Hills.

The Academy

Mr. Ply's lighting work is part of the featured photography in Nate Mullen's Trade Secrets of Professional Landscape Lighting. Mr. Mullen is president of the recently formed International Academy of Architectural Landscape Lighting (Academy) out of Escondido (near San Diego), of which Mr. Ply is a certified member. This certification is given only to contractors who have mastered "proper low-voltage design and installation techniques, including eliminating voltage drop, basic lighting design concepts, hub wiring connections, low-voltage transformer installation, lighting demos, checking amperage and voltage, and UL specifications and NEC requirements."

The mission statement of the Academy is to be the "world's leading source for guidelines, standards and education of professional architectural landscape lighting design and installation." The Academy has a code of professional practice that encourages assisting colleagues in their professional development, being accurate in claims and specifications to clients, and ensuring that all products and equipment is of the highest standards. It also has a code of conduct and code of ethics. There are 25 contractors in the Academy.

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This is the entry to a home in Beverly Park an exclusive gated community within the Beverly Hills enclave, lighting by landscape contractor Jim Ply. The day I spoke with Jim, he had several lighting demonstrations scheduled in this neighborhood. Jim generally uses 35-watt PAR 36 halogen lights. The halogens provide clean white light. The 35-watt lamps, with proper placement, provide the appropriate level of illumination. PAR 36 indicates a parabolic aluminized reflector, a lamp having a lens of heavy durable glass that focuses a 36 degree beam spread. At the entry is uplighting via Starburst fixtures, shrouded and stake-mounted to allow for bevel adjustment, working in combination with the existing coach lights for an even level of lighting. It was necessary to bring the coach lights into scale with the new lighting, toning them down from 60 or 75 watt bulbs to 25 watts. The carrot wood trees are lit with a circle of four Apollo well lights. Note the house number (lower right) is lit (a Viking fixture) for easy address recognition.

Low-Voltage Lighting Design

"Most of what we do is uplighting," explains Jim Ply. "Most of the time we can get the lighting job done from down below. We try to limit employees going up into trees.

"Most every contractor installs lights on a project, but they really don't give it much thought, just a line item addition on a contract to add three or four thousand dollars to a project. The thought they put into is, 'Well, we'll put in about 20 lights, some over here, some over there and a few back here,' until you run out of lights. Our philosophy is totally different. We're selling a lighting portrait for the home.

"The way I used to install lights was to go to the homeowner and pull out one of several manufacturers' lighting books. I'd say, 'Do you like that fixture?' They were picking it. But it's not about the pretty fixtures; they're just lamp holders. They need to be built well and strong, but we don't want people to see the fixtures; we want them to see the effects of the lighting, both the landscaping and the architectural features of the home.

"Usually the way a contractor will light a tree is to place one light at the base of the trunk. Now you've got a trunk that glows. I would place four well lights around the tree into the grass. The big magnolia for the demo tonight has 12 lights. The spread on it is probably 40 feet. But those lights, using only 35-watt lamps, will light the entire canopy. I'll talk to landscape designers who tell me, 'You can't light it with a 35-watt lamp.' Yes we can."



It's Halloween, in case you're wondering about the "spider web," but it's not dark or spooky. The olive trees and Italian cypress benefit once again from multiple well lights, as do the columns and arches from Starburst fixtures with 35 watt MR 16 lamps, two per column. The contractor placed 15 watt lamps in all the coach lights and chandeliers to keep an even light level. "We try not to have a dark space and then 40 feet away a lighted area. We want a continuous flow," explains Jim Ply. "We come out every three or six months, whichever the homeowner chooses, and clean the lenses, make sure all the bulbs are working, check the amperage or whatever it takes to make it work—trim the bushes, raise up the fixtures," he adds.

Multi-tap Transformers and the "Hub"

"There are a lot of misconceptions about low-voltage lighting—you can't light anything with it, they break, and on and on," says Jim Ply. "Nate (Mullen) has been the leader in this industry in making low-voltage lighting functional for landscape projects. I've used every manufacturers' lights, and have been to their classes to find someone who has it all together. Nate is the one who really promoted the multiple-tap transformer."

To avoid voltage drop, the Academy uses the Multi-Matic transformer, allowing the contractor to select from up to eight voltage taps: 12 through 18, and 20, 22 volts.

The Academy shuns the "Daisy chain" wiring method, in which a wire runs from the transformer to the first fixture (the "home run"), and then connects to a line of fixtures. The first fixture receives full voltage, but the remaining fixtures receive less and less juice. The Academy uses the hub, loop or "T" wiring methods. Jim explains the hub method: "I can take a long wire run and make my connection at a hub. You keep all wires from the hub to the fixtures with the same length of wire (25' of 16/2 gauge; 50' of 12/2 gauge) and use a run of only 4-5 fixtures. The fixtures don't have to be the same type of fixture as long as the amp rating of the wire is not exceeded. You check the voltage at the transformer, which, let's say, reads 8.5 volts. I then go to the 15-volt tap and put the home run wire there. I end up with 11.5 volts or so, which is fine, and all the lights have the same intensity. You don't have the voltage drop, or rather, we have compensated for it.

"I don't have any wire nuts in the ground. The hub is basically a piece of PVC that houses the home run wire and the five other fixture wires. The wires are then inserted into a brass lug and secured by a lug screw. Then a special threaded wire nut coated with lithium grease is screwed onto the outside of the brass lug. So the old problem we used to have with the wire nuts in the ground we no longer have. We don't put one wire nut into the ground. And the new hubs are even fused. Let's say I have a home run wire and five fixtures and there is a short, it would blow the fuse in the hub, but the rest of the lights would stay on instead of traveling back to the transformer and kicking them all out."



A close up of an olive tree uplift by well lights. The Apollo fixtures are flush with the grass and can be mowed over without any damage to the stainless steel socket and solar lenses. A cover is always used when the fixture is used in a planting bed to prevent debris from falling inside the fixture and touching the lamp, which could possibly cause a fire.

With every job, Jim Ply makes sure the crew amp probes every wire. "We know the amp draw through every wire. You can have a fire with low-voltage lighting if you put too many amps into a 12-gauge wire. We check all the wires leaving the transformer and those going to the 110 volts side. And I'll tell you, about 95 percent of landscape contractors don't even own an amp meter."

There are two other Academy-approved wiring methods: In the loop method the wire is looped from the first fixture to the last, then back again. In the "T" method, the home run wire goes to the middle fixture first.

The Lighting Demo

One of the evenings I met with Jim, he was on his way to a live lighting demonstration of a home in the "flats" of Beverly Hills, a nice normal size home, not one of the 20,000 sq. foot mansions. These demos are a huge selling point. Jim lays out the design and flags the setup for his crew. He employs two three-man crews who have been trained in low-voltage lighting installation by Unique Lighting.



Starburst uplights accent the columns, rose bushes and walls, with Apollo well lights on the grass circling the olive tree. The Academy's preferred wiring method is a long wire run with a connection at a hub, which is a wiring manifold to distribute voltage evenly. The wires from a hub are kept the same length (25' of 16/2 gauge or 50' of 12/2 gauge) and connect only 4-5 fixtures. The fixtures don't have to be the same type, as long as the amp rating of the wire is not exceeded. Voltage drop is further compensated for by a multi-tap transformer.

I was invited to view the demonstration and was disappointed at not being able to get away. He explained that demonstration included 70 lights in the front yard, an \$18-20K price tag installed. A crew can install about 25 lights a day. This demo took his three-man crew 3-5 days to install.

"If I just hand them a lighting contract for \$27,000, that sometimes is a little tough to take. But when they see the effect of what we are doing it allows them to assign value to what they see."

Once the homeowner views the demonstration they generally say, "Let's do it."

"We've done residential lighting projects of \$50,000, \$75,000 and others far greater than that," Jim specifies.



Shadowing of the fountain is achieved by cross lighting from below and from the side via MR16 20-watt bulbs. The fixtures are hidden behind benches on each side of the fountain. Fixtures angled at 30 degrees or less reduce glare and hot spots.

The Last Lighting System the Homeowner Will Ever Have to Purchase

"The fixtures we use are mostly Odyssey (Unique)," explains Jim Ply. "They're all brass fixtures with lifetime warranties on them and the transformers. Every Odyssey fixture comes with a wire lead, a brass ring and three glass lenses, clear, frosted and spread. That makes for easy installation, allowing me to tailor the light for the particular occasion without having to order a lens. The brass is more expensive, of course, but it won't corrode.

Because we're certified as installers, the entire system is guaranteed for life, with a maintenance contract we provide. We come out every three or six months, whichever the homeowner chooses, and clean the lenses, make sure all the bulbs are working, check the amperage or whatever it takes to make it work—trim the bushes, raise up the fixtures. Five years from now, the job still going to look new. The customer pays for any bulbs that need replacing, but will never pay for another fixture or transformer.



Sometimes you can't win. The water feature has three circular fountains. The owner took the advice of the interior designer and placed only one light for each fountain, with one being pink for some reason. When the fountains are on, the illumination is not adequate to highlight the water spread. Jim Ply wanted to use three per fountain. He incorporated cross lighting (MR16s 20-watts) for the statue. Starbursts light the boxwood hedges and orange trees. Their reflected light brings out the architectural detail and the potato vines on the columns. The Academy teaches three levels of lighting for a property: Level 3 is the focal point and brightest area (the statue). Level 2 is the "connecting bridge of light" to the focal point (the architectural line atop the columns). Level 1 extends space and defines boundaries (tree lighting).

"It will be the last lighting system they will ever have to purchase. You can have someone else come in there and put in 30 lights. Three years from now, half of those lights won't work. So, is that a better buy? I don't think so. You've wasted money. They're not going to warrantee the fixtures. Who's going to fix it? Ours is bullet proof. It's easy to find the problems. Let's say a gardener cut one of the wires but my guys can't find. We just run a new one.

"Once we do the job it's entirely written out. I know all the runs and their locations, what wattage of lamp goes on each fixture. We have full plans and do CADD drawings if needed. It makes it easy for my guys when they go out to job site. It takes the entire lighting portion of a project full circle. It's designed properly, installed properly and maintained properly.

The Academy is seeking out the large type of project specified by landscape architects, because they do the large jobs. "Once they see the quality of our work, we hope to get calls from them. We can do the installation and the maintenance," he says. Lighting jobs not only lead to lighting referrals, but Jim notes that after one lighting installation he was contracted to do \$120K in plants for the same residence.



Jim Ply, president, Oak Crest Landscape, landscape contractor and certified member of the International Academy of Architectural Landscape Lighting. "I drive through Beverly Hills and do not find many nice lighting jobs. It's not because the people can't afford it, it's because they're not being given an option."

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