

Kitchen Lighting Design

With the right fixtures in the right places, you can create anything from a soft glow to clear task lighting

BY MATTHEW TEAGUE

With open floor plans, personalized storage and appliance options, designated workstations and social areas, even offices and kid zones, the kitchen has evolved. As such, a single, surface-mount light fixture centered in the kitchen ceiling is no longer sufficient. The truth is, it never was.

Fortunately, there has been progress in kitchen lighting as well, in both fixtures and design. Because no one fixture can provide the light necessary to create a kitchen that is both functional and comfortable, designers opt instead for a variety of light sources—some direct, some indirect—that work together to create layers and balance.

Layers are the secret to effective kitchen lighting

Like the single fixture that lit your grandmother's kitchen, the most common mistake today is to rely on recessed lights alone. Every designer has his or her own approach to lighting, but most agree that it takes layers to light a kitchen effectively.

At a minimum, you should have ambient and task lighting (sidebar right). In a simple kitchen plan, dimmable recessed fixtures can provide both. Aimed at art or an architectural fixture, a recessed light can even qualify as accent lighting. But it is the addition of decorative and hidden fixtures that make the difference between a functional space and a well-lit kitchen. To achieve this goal, you need to mix direct and indirect



Four ways to light a kitchen

AMBIENT

Often referred to as "fill" light, ambient light is the general lighting in the room. It is used to soften shadows and to create a warm feeling. The goal is to use well-diffused light that illuminates the room throughout the day. Because natural light changes often, all ambient lighting should be dimmable. Chandeliers, recessed lights, and track and monorail systems all can be used to create ambient light. But you shouldn't rely on a single overhead fixture, which can produce objectionable shadows on walls and ceilings. Instead, choose properly spaced recessed lights, track or monorail fixtures with multiple bulbs, or a combination of ambient-light sources.

TASK

When it comes to workstations, the best spot for light is somewhere between your eyes and what you're looking at (the vegetables you're chopping or the bills you're paying). At a minimum, you'll want task lights shining on countertops, over the range, and above the sink. Depending on the kitchen, you also could need to light a dining table, an island, or a small desk. Many different types of fixtures can provide task lighting. The most common—and useful—are undercabinet lights, but pendants as well as track systems can be used to provide task lighting. In general, a bright, white light is best.

DECORATIVE

While decorative fixtures can provide task, ambient, and accent lighting, they are also important for the presence of the fixture itself. Decorative, or architectural, lighting provides a focus for the room. Chandeliers over a dining table are a common use of decorative lighting. Keep in mind, however, that a fixed chandelier hanging over a dining table makes rearranging difficult. Also, any light above a reflective surface has the potential to cause glare. Pendants paired with a track system allow for flexible decorative lighting; wall sconces can also be used to define a space and set an elegant mood.

ACCENT

Also called feature lighting or highlighting, accent lighting is intended to draw your attention to a particular detail. You can wash a plastered or textured wall with soft light from a sconce, or highlight a painting or a fireplace with focused recessed lights or track lights aimed at the object. If you have a green thumb, consider lighting a favorite houseplant.

RECESSED LIGHTS ARE VERSATILE

Recessed lights can serve as ambient, task, or accent lighting. For ambient light, set recessed cans about 30 in. from the wall and 4 ft. to 6 ft. apart, depending on the can diameter and the ceiling height (light should overlap). For task lighting, cans need to be located directly above the worksurface. Choose a trim kit that allows you to focus the light in a specific direction to showcase a detail and to create accent lighting. A variety of trim and baffle styles are available (see examples below from Halo). The color and style of the baffle affect the color quality of the light produced.



The sink deserves its own source of light.

To keep this fundamental workstation well lit, you need to place a light as close to directly above the sink as possible. A recessed light works well. If your cabinet design includes a fascia that bridges the open space between the tops of wall cabinets, consider hiding an undercabinet fixture there.

Retrofit options. In a kitchen remodel, you can install recessed cans without tearing out the ceiling. Unlike new-construction housings that nail between joists, special remodel housings slip through a hole in the ceiling and clip to the drywall. Below, Halo 6-in. housings (www.haloltg.com).



Black trim and directional black baffle



Square antique copper trim with black baffle



Satin nickel trim with pinhole black baffle

lighting. Sconces, pendants, and chandeliers are examples of direct lighting: The fixture is visible. Undercabinet and cove lights cast a glow without a visible fixture to create indirect lighting.

According to Joseph A. Rey-Barreau, AIA, director of education for the American Lighting Association, "The key to kitchen lighting is to start with the sink." The sink is a kitchen's most fundamental workstation, so Rey-Barreau likes to install a dedicated light for cleanup tasks. He often incorporates undercabinet fixtures and recessed lights next. With undercabinet lights illuminating the countertops and recessed fixtures around the kitchen's perimeter (about 30 in. from the walls, not the cabinet fronts), he covers task and ambient lighting for most of the kitchen. Finally, he chooses an overhead light for the center of the room, such as track lights or a trio of pendants over an island. With these fixtures, Rey-Barreau adds decorative lighting to the equation.

Dimmers control the mood

In some areas, like the kitchen table, you might want soft ambient light while eating meals and brighter task lighting while helping your kids with their homework. You also might want bright



Remodel housing



New-construction housing

INVISIBLE FIXTURES FOR COUNTERTOP TASKS

If you're considering undercabinet task lighting, first make sure the face frames of the upper cabinets hang down low enough to conceal the fixtures and to prevent glare. For the same reason, and because it's closer to where you work, undercabinet fixtures should be installed toward the front of the cabinets. Although undercabinet fixtures come in a variety of configurations, there are four common lamp types to choose from, each with its own set of pros and cons. (Photo above courtesy of Sea Gull Lighting.)



1. Fluorescent. Low-cost, long-lasting, and energy-efficient, fluorescents cast light that is bright and even; but unfortunately, most cannot be dimmed. Choose quieter fixtures with electronic ballasts.

2. Halogen. These gas-filled incandescent bulbs product high-quality, bright-white light and a lot of heat. So while they offer excellent task lighting, they might melt the chocolate in the cabinet above. Their life span is longer than that of regular incandescent lights.

3. Xenon. These bulbs run cooler and last much longer than halogen bulbs. Some models offer high and low switching, eliminating the need for a dimmer. However, xenon fixtures may require the installation of a remote transformer, and light quality may diminish when the bulb is dimmed.

4. LED. Light-emitting diodes are the most expensive, but they use little energy and likely will outlast your kitchen. Some models let you adjust the color of the light produced, from warm gold to cool white.

PENDANTS HANG OUT IN STYLE

Easy to install, pendants can provide ambient, task, and decorative lighting while lending style to the kitchen. The most popular application for pendants in today's kitchens is over an island. Allow at least 30 in. of clearance between pendants and a work-

surface or table. Pendants can be as decorative or as subtle as you wish. Some come with flashy glass globes that grab your attention immediately. The smallest are quite inconspicuous, only 2 in. to 3 in. in diameter, and hang on nearly invisible cords.



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Pick a pendant. These days, it seems like a trio of pendant lights is an integral part of island design. However, there are many uses for pendants, and even more styles of this popular lamp. **1.** A blue glass globe from Bruck (www.brucklightingsystems.com) is a sure attention grabber. **2.** A single pendant from Rejuvenation (www.rejuvenation.com) has three lamps to provide enough light for a dining table. **3.** A pair of Atoll pendants from Translite Sonoma (www.sonomalighting.com) hangs from ceiling beams to light an island (kitchen design by Rick Proppe). **4.** Project designer Leslie Sager used Hubbardton Forge pendants (www.vtforge.com) as the primary light source to enhance the Japanese aesthetic in this kitchen.

undercabinet lighting while you're chopping vegetables, but a softer glow on the backsplash while entertaining. All it takes is a dimmable fixture. Dimming not only makes the room more functional, but also adds dimension to the space. "If there are no dimmed zones, you're left with no accents and no contrast," says Doug Stewart, a certified lighting designer at Hermitage Lighting Gallery in Nashville, Tenn. "The kitchen will appear flat and less dimensional."

As you can see, one fixture used effectively can cover multiple types of lighting. Aesthetically, the fixtures you choose should mesh seamlessly with the room. Pewter, satin nickel, bronze, and wrought iron are popular finishes today, as are glass pendants and globes, but it is important to make sure the fixtures and finishes you choose match the style and finish of the hardware in your kitchen. It's smart to bring material samples and to talk to professionals when shopping for light fixtures.

You don't have to spend a lot to get a lot

Whether you're designing a new kitchen, remodeling an old one, or simply replacing lights in an existing kitchen, you should do some legwork before talking to a designer or shopping for fixtures.

Study the kitchen's floor plan and identify workstations, social areas, and appliances that need to be well lit. Is there a detail that you'd like to highlight? Measure the ceiling and the cabinet height. If you're remodeling, note where outlet and junction boxes are currently located. You can



DEFINE THE DINING AREA WITH A CHANDELIER

Whether it's an ornate antique or a sleek, modern fixture, a chandelier is a decorative light source that can quickly establish your kitchen's style. Most commonly, chandeliers are used above a table to define the dining area. Although it is possible to use a chandelier as a kitchen's main source of ambient light, in most cases you'll need supplemental fixtures to reduce shadows and dark areas. A chandelier can also be used for task lighting, if a table doubles as a worksurface, for example. Allow at least 30 in. of space between the table and the fixture.



A period fixture makes an exclamation point. Designer Lori Erenberg used fixtures from Fortuny Lighting (www.lightology.com) to boost the authenticity of this Craftsman-style home. The ornate chandelier defines the dining area with decorative and ambient light. At top, a chandelier from Kichler (www.kichler.com).

FLEXIBLE FIXTURES ARE ON TRACK

Track-lighting systems allow you to change the direction of the light and even cast it a good distance away. You can point lights down at a kitchen island for task lighting while you're preparing a meal, then aim them to accent a detail while you're eating dinner. These systems come in both high- and low-voltage options. Although these fixtures tend to look modern, they're available in a wide array of styles, sizes, and bulb types. Tracks can be straight or serpentine. Some models allow you to hang pendants at varying heights, while others allow you to mix shapes and bulbs on a single track.



take along photos of your cabinets and countertops, samples of hardware, or an existing fixture for inspiration. Even paint samples can be helpful when choosing fixtures.

Just as important, have a firm idea of what you can afford to spend. "In the whole scheme of things," says Lynn Grubbs, an interior designer and owner of Lynn Grubbs Interiors in Nashville, "lighting is one of the more affordable ways to make a dramatic impact." For new kitchens (including major remodels), lighting is typically only 2% to 3% of the total cost.

"Prices have gone down dramatically in the last five years because of imports. You can now get the expensive look for the middle price," says Grubbs. Of course, you can spend as much or as little as you want. A recessed can with a basic white trim costs less than \$30 at most home centers, while one chandelier at a lighting showroom may cost thousands.

Finally, don't underestimate the need for a lighting designer. At the very least, do your homework at a quality lighting center with knowledgeable associates. There is a wide range of products available. A good lighting consultant can even save you money, pointing you toward less expensive fixtures that achieve the same goals as top-of-the-line models. And don't hesitate to ask if your lighting consultant makes house calls. You'll thank yourself for taking the time to get the light right in the hardest-working room in your house. □

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Waves of light. 1. A sleek track system from Sea Gull Lighting (www.seagulllighting.com) includes fixtures that aim and swivel to provide a range of ambient, task, and accent lighting. **2.** Halo's flexible track system can be shaped as you see fit and takes a variety of different fixtures (www.haloltg.com). **3.** Pendants can hang on a track, too, as shown in the arcing fixture (Prima; www.primalighting.com) that designer Amy Duerr-Day used above a similarly shaped island.

CFLs: a spectrum of energy-efficient lighting

According to the U.S. Green Building Council, outfitting your home's five most frequently used light fixtures with compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFLs) can cut your electric bill by as much as \$100 per year. That's because CFLs are four times more efficient than incandescents. In terms of watts, a 13w CFL produces as much light as a 60w incandescent bulb, and a 25w CFL is equal to a 100w incandescent. In an attempt to make shopping less confusing, most CFLs are marked with their incandescent equivalent.

If these savings don't seem worth the cost of humming fixtures and poor-quality light, it's time to check out the newest products. Many new CFLs have electronic ballasts that regulate the current going into the bulb, cutting out the noise that many of us associate with fluorescent lighting. Electronic ballasts also eliminate flickering. There have been improvements in the quality of light produced by CFLs as well. In fact, the bulbs are now sold in multiple shades, including "soft white" for a warm tone, "cool white" for brighter, whiter light, and "daylight" for clear blue light. Other manufacturers market their products with such labels as "warm" and "neutral." If you want to dim CFLs, make sure you pair a dimming ballast with a dimmer designed to work with it. It's slightly more expensive, but the energy savings are guaranteed.



WALL SCONCES ARE AN ELEGANT ACCENT



Hanging wall sconces alongside kitchen exits (to other areas of the house or to outdoor living spaces) helps to establish separate living areas in an open floor plan. If your dining area is open to the kitchen, sconces on the wall behind the dining table lend a dramatic look that helps to establish the mood and style of the room. Adding wall sconces in the dining area also helps to cut down on tabletop glare caused by overhead fixtures. Sconces can provide a certain amount of ambient light, but they're more often used as decorative and accent lighting.

Sconces up and down. Architects Steven and Judy Selin used sconces from Conant Metal & Light (www.conantmetallandlight.com) for task, ambient, and accent lighting in this kitchen. Some point down to illuminate the countertop; others point up to highlight the ceiling. Sconces are made to suit just about any task and are a great way to define your kitchen's style. **1.** A double-lamp sconce from Lithonia Lighting (www.lithonia.com). **2, 3.** Artisan lights from Hubbardton Forge (www.vtforge.com). **4.** A glass globe from Bruck (www.brucklightingsystems.com).



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