

Insights into Lighting for Listed Houses



It can be said that the key to great lighting is having something great to light, and listed houses offer huge opportunities. This article talks specifically about houses rather than more public buildings. Rarely are you faced with a boring or bland space, but often the features that make a listed property so interesting are those that make the lighting particularly challenging. Spaces with incredibly high or low ceilings are made trickier by the difficulty in finding fixing points for the lights. Lighting focal points or particular pieces of artwork is complicated by the need to minimise cabling and disruption to the fabric of the building.

The design framework ideally used for lighting listed houses is similar to any residential project. Start with determining the uses and needs of each space; this informs the level and nature of the lighting required. Identify the focal points to give your design structure and interest. Also identify the issue areas or challenges; these might include elements like towering ceilings or limited fixing points. With those focus areas identified the next step is to develop the most effective and efficient route.

The lighting framework in listed houses is however also informed by other considerations that don't affect new builds. You need to respect the significance of the building and what it is that makes it significant. So when designing you must ask yourself, how do you respect the integrity of the building? How can you minimise impact on the fabric of the structure and what can you do to make any work reversible?

It is easiest to illustrate this approach through real-life examples. Brilliant Lighting, a company who specialise in lighting historic homes, were approached to light a glorious 17th century listed barn with a spectacular oak frame. The barn was effectively one single space and the lighting plays an important part in demarking the individual zones. Kitchen lighting was delivered by a visually unobtrusive track light and the fixing points used custom brackets to remove the need to drill the ancient beams. The lit sail over the table added a cosy, intimate space for evening dining and the concept was tested on-site long before electrical work started. The powerful downlights on custom-made brackets were supported by floor-recessed uplights which helped to fill the space with ambient light and provide the light in the roof space while minimising the need to fix to the beams. Early planning, testing and collaboration with other interior or structural elements of the project

was a key factor in making the lighting work. Testing is important. Don't assume a light will give you the results you want; check it out for output and colour.

Lighting technology was a key enabler in this project. Lighting control systems are the best way to control LED lighting and offer a route to reduce the total amount of cabling required which is a huge benefit in any listed building project. This barn project highlights a conflict that many owners of listed houses may face. How do you minimise the amount of cabling while retaining flexibility? The answer here was to use a lighting control system and a dimming protocol more commonly found in commercial projects. In this instance a combination of a Lutron HomeWorks control system and the digital DALI protocol reduced the amount of cable required by over half

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High ceilings, new extensions, large windows – typical challenges in lighting barns



Main image: Downlights and ground recessed uplights combine to fill the vast ceiling

Left: Strong vertical up/down lights emphasise the glazed link structure



when compared to a conventionally wired system. DALI also dims LED beautifully and most importantly, it means the lighting zones can be reconfigured in software without altering the cabling. If the homeowners want to change the way the space is used in the future, the lighting circuits can be regrouped and altered with no further disruption.

Using the latest lighting technology can help strike the right balance between performance and sympathetic feel. This can be seen in a second case study of a beautiful house built from part of a medieval abbey with a Georgian extension. The medieval half of the house features a large hall with high ceilings filled with artwork and tapestries. The hall is both a formal dining room and a living room, and the lighting is a key part of creating a stunning but cosy space. The scheme at first glance looks to be very traditional with table lamps and picture lights. Look closer and there are layers of very discretely concealed

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Concealed lighting accentuates the details in the medieval hall




Layers of lighting and magnificent 5m wide tapestry lit with LED

lighting: uplights pick up the window arches, downlights pick up the seating and mini spots enhance the depth and texture of the fireplace. Excellent quality LED fittings create both a lovely colour of light and, because of their excellent colour rendering, bring out the warmth and hues of the natural materials.

The Georgian wing of the house demonstrates alternative methods for lighting features without disturbing precious décor or trying to fix lighting into difficult locations. Lighting the owners' art collection was a very important part of the scheme. Each picture in the drawing room is lit with a bespoke ArtView LED picture light tuned to the characteristics of the painting it is lighting. The interior designer wanted a fabric covered wall and didn't want lots of holes in it for the picture light cabling. Brilliant Lighting found an ingenious solution. Cable is carried through the bespoke picture hanging rail and down the hanging chains to each picture. The system makes the most of the collection, allows for future flexibility and leaves the rich fabric battened wall untouched.

In the snug the shelving is home to fun family treasures. The shelving was designed together with Brilliant Lighting, and discreet linear LED lighting with frosted covers was incorporated and mounted at an angle to eliminate glare from the individual diodes. Aside from lamps and ArtView picture lighting, the lit display shelving is the only source of light in the room. By using the joinery though it created interest, and there is enough ambient light in the room not to require additional downlights or pendants which would disturb the old ceiling.

These two case studies illustrate a number of points, but a key one is the need for early planning and involvement from your lighting designer. Encourage collaboration between all the parties working on the project, identify issue areas early and test design concepts as much as you can. Don't be afraid of using new technology but ensure it is used as sensitively as possible. Above all, respect your building and let lighting help bring it to life.

Brilliant Lighting delivers inspirational lighting design across the UK from their studios in North Yorkshire. They specialise in residential lighting, particularly lighting historic homes, significant artwork and contemporary new builds. 

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Top: Custom hanging system conceals electrical cabling and preserves the fabric wall

Bottom: Discreet custom linear LED fittings in the shelving