

Guide to Landscape Lighting Design Critique

Professional Guide:

Defining 'Good' Landscape Lighting Design

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IMPORTANT NOTE

This document has Not been officially accepted by any industry authority. This is due to the lack of awareness within the industry. However, it is part of this thoughtful initiative **to better standardize the Landscape Lighting Trade Professions and those Judging Awards Programs.**

The trade professional can best utilize this work as a form of measure against their current design practices. These principles and rules will act to conform the credibility of judging artistic works within the practice of landscape lighting design.

Overview

The **Experiential Landscape Lighting Initiative (ELLI)** was established to provide education to all interested parties; however, this guide serves the trade practice and professional landscape lighting designer. It serves to raise the bar and to better the discipline. This Design Critique Guide is to be used by the professional to evaluate and critique landscape lighting work. It is intended to act as a measuring tool for those judging awards programs and for those teaching in an educational capacity. In addition, it can be a learning tool for all landscape lighting designers to advance themselves in this art-form.

To date, no trade association or organization has established a proper set of rules to measure or define 'good' landscape lighting design. This is a huge problem within the profession. Many landscape lighting designers rely on various manufacturer and association award programs to encourage peer recognition and credibility within the profession. Yet, nobody questions whether these programs are truly fit to measure. If awards are to have any real value and meaning, we must have expectations, standards, and principles to govern such offerings.

Awards programs need to align themselves with legitimate judges—those with real-world, proven experience in the craft and those with a professional understanding of art. Far too often, judging takes place by manufacturer reps, company owners or anyone willing to fill the role. We cannot continue to allow the 'blind' to lead the 'blind'. Programs that discern proven experience will lead in the assurance of a credible offering.

For those acting in the role of awards program director, there are three important questions to consider:

- 1. Who's judging these entries?**
- 2. What proven background and experience do the judges have?**
- 3. What standards of measure are being utilized in this judging?**

The goal to this reorganization effort is to identify, define and ensure 'relevant' and 'good' landscape lighting design works. The consumer and trade practitioner needs to have a meaningful bar that will measure acceptable work. It shouldn't matter if the lighting design is simplistic or advanced, rather it should conform to acceptable lighting design principles.

The benefits associated with establishing basic rules and principles are:

- **Uniform measure between all providers**
- **The subjective becomes more objective**
- **Understanding equates to advancement**

Considerations of Current Conditions

If we are to advance as a profession, we must properly classify the different components of landscape lighting, garden lighting, outdoor lighting, exterior lighting, and architectural lighting. Currently, these terms are used haphazardly and it's causing confusion. Many awards programs use basic terms, which end up allowing these various classifications to be lumped together.

Example: many times, architectural lighting designs will be lumped into the landscape lighting category. Because many of these architectural lighting designs are impactful displays, they might win in a category that is really meant for landscape lighting. Is that fair?

Lighting Categories

In the following list of categories, there are three (3) distinct types. Associated categories are listed under the primary type, because these are the ones used without proper care:

1. Landscape Lighting

Landscape Lighting—is the illumination of private gardens and public landscapes. This is quite a broad category and includes several sub-categories to aid in the judging process. This will be discussed in detail in the following section, **Landscape Lighting Considerations**.

Garden Lighting—is an older term once used but is nothing more than landscape lighting.

2. Architectural Lighting

Architectural Lighting—is a field within architecture, interior and electrical engineering that is concerned with the design of lighting systems, including natural light, electric light or both. Its objective is to further the design of architecture or the experience of buildings and other physical structures. In addition, it must address two different scales, which include exterior and interior settings.

- **Architecture (buildings and structures)**—this element pertains to the primary content of the setting/scene. If this primary element is the building or structure and is **larger than 50% of the photographic image or content**, then it is the controlling element of the setting. Architecture usually refers to the residence (home), commercial building, or any other dominant structural building included on the property. And, it should include any structural elements attached to it. Examples of structures include; **porches, ramadas, verandas, roof decks, patio/overhead covers, and other inclusions** attached to the primary architectural element.

Note: Many landscape lighting designers feature a residential home with minimal landscaping included in their award category entry, yet this is realistically a form of architectural lighting. Therefore, it needs to be separated into its own category.

3. Outdoor Lighting

Outdoor Lighting—not clearly defined, as definitions pertain to lighting that is used outdoors. Outdoor lighting is described for illumination, decoration or advertisement. Examples of outdoor lighting include; **parking lot, roadway, buildings & structures, recreational areas, landscaped buildings, billboards & signage, product displays, building or structure decoration, and building overhangs & open canopies.**

Exterior Lighting—not clearly defined, as definitions usually pertain to lighting that is used outdoors.

As we consider each of these categories, you will see that each relates to the exterior, outdoor environment. There is only one that has a mixed-use approach—Architectural, because it includes interior settings. Also, Outdoor lighting pertains mostly to the structural and hardscaped elements of the outdoors. Landscape lighting is the only one that includes the living, softscaped elements of the outdoors. Lighting design professionals and those acting to judge awards programs must effectively itemize design works into the proper categories, so that fairness is ensured in all categories.

There is another consideration that is usually not addressed, but it can affect a judging process. It relates to the **Power (system voltage)** provided to the lighting system utilized in the design. If we are to be fair and ensure ‘apples to apples,’ then we must initiate and separate these differences. This includes the basic voltages used towards landscape and architectural lighting--**120-volt, 12-volt, and sometimes 24-volt systems.** There are advantages and disadvantages to each but judging project entries would be most fair by grouping like types.

Energy-Use and Light Pollution Issues

Although energy use and light pollution are big issues included within the parameters of good design, I have chosen not to include any details of these needs with this guide. The reason for this is because there are other more detailed studies, guides and regulation efforts in the works for this. Landscape lighting should be included in these determinations, as it is still part of the lighting design realm. However, this will be provided properly at a later time.

As a quick note on energy use, it’s always considered best to use as little energy as required to achieve the desired lighting intent. Energy consumption and wasteful use of energy is a negative impact on society.

There are three (3) factors to light pollution: **Glare, Light Trespass, and Sky Glow.** As far as they impact the landscape lighting designer, glare and light trespass are the most important. Each of these is considered a negative impact on society.

Glare is considered excessive and uncontrolled use of light. Not only can it be disabling, but it can be distracting and uncomfortable to the viewer of a landscape lighting setting. Glare occurs when a light source is seen. Contributing glare occurs when light is distributed at or less than 90-degrees below the horizontal plane. This can be in the form of seeing the actual light source or seeing the reflection of it. In any case, it can negatively impact the experience of the space. A negative experience is considered a bad lighting design.

Light Trespass occurs will light strays away from its intended target and onto an adjacent property that is not desired. This stray light is considered ‘spill’ light and it must be controlled or minimized to ensure comfort to others. There are few ways in which to control this and it includes proper aiming and positioning of light fixtures, as well as utilize proper fixture shielding. Light trespass provides a negative experience as well.

Sky Glow occurs when light is aimed upwards and into the sky. It occurs when light is distributed at or more than 90-degrees above the horizontal plane. Sky glow is the accumulation of light present back to the earth as lights scatters off of dust and gas particles in the atmosphere. It can be caused by direct light sources aimed into the sky or reflected light off of the ground plane. And as would make sense, the more light...the less darkness.

Note: Although low voltage, landscape lighting contributes to the overall impact of sky glow, most landscape lighting systems are not the primary abuser in sky glow issues. If we realistically look at it, the lumen output of landscape lighting products is relatively little—commercial centers, gas stations, parking lots, etc., are problems that need addressing.

Landscape Lighting Considerations

Firstly, landscape lighting design needs to address the elements of the landscape and outdoor natural environment. This pertains to the **living elements** of nature—trees, shrubs, ground covers, vines, ornamental and edible plantings. Secondly, it can include structural and hardscaped elements associated within the natural setting. These **non-living elements** are considered secondary in terms of priority. Some may question this and ask, why? It is because there is no other category that is dedicated to or serves this living element—landscape.

By separating landscape and architectural lighting, it allows us to place emphasis on what’s truly the essence of each form of work. Additionally, we can further breakdown the ‘landscape’ category into various sub-categories, so that one specialized element is not in favor over the other during the awards process.

Landscape Sub-Categories

The “Landscape” category consists of not only living elements, but it encompasses several non-living aspects. Therefore, we need to understand how to best separate them into sub-categories. Each sub-category can entertain its own awards category, especially if there are a lot of works to consider for awards. By doing so, future works can be fairly compared against like content. The following are adequate sub-categories to meet most organization and association needs:

- **Landscape/ Plantings (landscapes, plantings and nature)**—this element pertains to the content of the entire setting. Landscape plantings should dominate the setting/scene by **more than 80% of the content**. The reason for this high percentage is because many entries will include other elements that can lend favoritism to the setting—these must be limited to ensure the relevance of this sub-category.

Ideally, landscape/ planting scenes should only consist of plantings and nature. However, many won’t, and they’ll include other elements. Care must be taken to determine whether this inclusion is acceptable under the content percentage listed above. For example, a scene might include a

small water feature, a piece of art, or a small landscape structure within the scene plantings. The plantings are always to be the primary focal element of the setting and stand alone on their own merit. At any time, if these other inclusions become the focal point of the scene, then they should be categorized into their own specific sub-category.

- **Water Features (pools or basins, ponds, streams, fountains, bird baths, and other features using water)**—these elements are composed of water and they are the emphasis of the scene. **At least 50% of the scene** is of the water feature. Typically, these water features capture a lot of attention because they stimulate two senses—visual (sight) and auditory (sound). There is greater emotional value associated with them over the other sub-categories, and for this reason they must be judged on their own. In addition, these types of features are normally more challenging to illuminate.
- **Garden Art/ Art (sculptures, art pieces, and other decorative design elements)**—this sub-category will likely be the most challenging, due to the nature of what ‘art’ is. One will find it very difficult to discern between varying art entries, so it might be worthwhile to separate this sub-category to a greater extent. Regardless, the same applies—**at least 50% of the scene** should be of the art piece displayed.

Another thing to remember is that art is in the eye of the beholder. Art usually is associated with meaning, and it acts to provoke mood. In many cases, art will reflect the property owner’s personality. The benefit always should be to develop the character of the space.

Garden art always lends itself to the setting—the landscape, and it’s a form of visual art. It should be noted that colored light can be included here. The use of light, especially colored light can greatly enhance the emotional value of the space, which can be good or bad. Lighting designers, as well as those judging these programs need to discern what is appropriate for the design. This discernment should separate those just applying color to the scene for impact versus those who subtly work with it.

- **Landscape Structures (structures within the landscape)**—these elements are man-made structures including **pergolas, gazebos, viewing decks, belvederes, pavilions, pagodas, cabanas, arbors, gates, screens, trellises, garden walls, and other like structures**. The main difference between architectural and landscape structures is that the landscape structure is not attached to the main structural element, such as the residence. If these structures are the primary emphasis in a setting, then they should entertain **50% or more of the scene**.
- **Public Spaces (spaces dedicated to a group of people)**—these elements are activity related towards people gathering and include; **entertainment patios, outdoor kitchens, outdoor fireplaces, gazebos, swimming pools, bocci courts, and other locations which encourage social interaction**. The primary aspect of this element is placed on group activities, fun, entertainment, socialization, or games and festivities. The public space sub-category needs to be viewed as a themed-space and **at least 50% or more of the scene** should be identified as such.

Note: Swimming pools, lap pools, wading or sitting basins, jacuzzi or hot tubs, and the like must consider their **size** and if these are **meant for group use or personal use**. For example, a small lap pool setting in a private space might best fit in the Personal Spaces sub-category vs. that of the Public Spaces one.

- **Personal Spaces (space dedicated to individual and partner use)**—these elements are related to isolated spaces to be used by one or two people, and include; **sanctuary gardens, therapeutic or healing gardens, privacy gardens, meditation or prayer gardens, and other intimate type locations**. The primary aspect of this element is to encourage relaxation, peace, serenity, healing and calm. As with public spaces, the personal space sub-category needs to be viewed as a themed-space and **at least 50% or more of the scene** should be identified as such.

Because each sub-category can be a beautiful display on its own, there truly needs to be a separation. How can one determine which is more beautiful or impactful? This separation measure ensures the ‘apples to apples’ test for fairness.

Defining Landscape Lighting Work

In the Overview section, we briefly mentioned why we need to define landscape lighting design works—it’s to ensure that advancement and growth take place. Currently, landscape lighting design is well behind other professions with regards to education. There are no formal college programs available to those seeking advancement, and the lighting industry concentrates its effort on the entry and mid-level practitioner. This Design Critique Guide is part of a comprehensive measure to allow for personal growth.

Our immediate goal is to provide a means to measuring good from not good. Although this guide does not explain the exacting details of installation methods, it does provide for understanding in what is considered ‘good’ landscape lighting design. This understanding can be utilized by individuals in their own works, as well as other work. The following format establishes the use of basic principles and rules.

Just like lighting design, landscape lighting falls into the subjective realm when considered—everyone has a different interpretation. Initially, we must identify why landscape lighting design is an Art-form. It is a ‘form’ of art because it is three-dimensional and encloses space. Additionally, it’s something we experience.

What is Art? Some say that art cannot be defined. However, art is something that moves us emotionally and it is something we experience. Art is intended to have a purpose. Additionally, it provides a sense of communication.

Visual art has five purposes:

- 1) **Ceremonial**
- 2) **Artistic Expression**
- 3) **Narrative**
- 4) **Functional**
- 5) **Persuasive**

So, the argument for landscape lighting design being considered an art-form is because it is functional, persuasive, and expressive. And because it's an art, it should follow the very principles and rules of it.

'Good' Lighting Design

In Art, one must consider the following:

- **Shape**
- **Form**
- **Texture**
- **Pattern**
- **Color**
- **Space**

Of these considerations, 'Space' becomes the primary element that highly impacts landscape lighting design. Space is three dimensional and includes depth. Another question arises, "What is the most important factor involved in space?" **Composition**. Therefore, the obvious next question is, "What is included in composition?" There are six elements that make up composition:

1. **Balance**
2. **Contrast**
3. **Emphasis**
4. **Pattern & Rhythm**
5. **Unity**
6. **Movement**

Each of these compositional elements must follow a basic set of rules. These rules are the ones we will apply to landscape lighting design. If a design is to be considered 'good', then it will comply to the artist's rules of composition.

Understanding Composition

This section is intended to understand each element of composition, as well as to define the rules and principles associated with them. They will act as the measuring guide to analyzing one's work.

1. Balance

Definitions:

- A balanced work, in which the visual weight is distributed evenly across the composition, seems stable, makes the viewer feel comfortable, and is pleasing to the eye.
- Balance is a visual interpretation of gravity in the design. Large, dense elements appear to be heavier while smaller elements appear to be lighter.

We feel more comfortable when the parts of an artwork seem to balance each other. There's a sense of calm within the design when it is balanced. This is a pleasing feeling, and it is preferred by those experiencing the design. You'll notice that we state "feeling" or mood, because it relates to the experience one has when stimulated by our work.

Balance can be broken down into three types, as described below:

- **Symmetrical Balance**—occurs when you can draw a line across or down through the design to create a mirror image. This type of balance feels formal, elegant and conservative. However, pure, symmetrical balance can feel boring, dull and constrained.
- **Asymmetrical Balance**—this type of balance is abstract and has no symmetry. It's a deliberate imbalance of the elements in the design, which creates tension and gives the design a sense of movement. Our mind will arrange or distribute these elements of perceived visual weights in such a way that each side is still balanced out. This type of balance can feel energetic, casual and free.
- **Radial Balance**—occurs when elements of the design radiate out from a central point. Our eyes are naturally drawn inwards to the center. This type of balance feels stable and it provides ease of mind.

Consideration to Landscape Lighting:

The use of light, which includes the placement of light fixtures can be arranged into these three types of symmetry. Each can work to provide balance to the scene. Therefore, from this perspective alone, the lighting design can be considered 'good' when the principles of balance are maintained.

Note: the landscape lighting designer should not look at only one element, such as balance, as the defining one to consider their design 'good.' All elements must be considered in this judgement.

2. Contrast:

Definition:

- A principle of art that refers to the arrangement of opposite elements (light vs. dark colors, rough vs. smooth textures, large vs. small shapes, etc.) in a piece, to create visual interest, excitement and drama. Contrast is the difference in luminance or color that makes an object (or its representation in an image or display) distinguishable.

In visual perception of the real world, contrast is determined by the difference in the color and brightness of the object and other objects within the same field of view.

There are several aspects of consideration within contrast, but there are two that are most applicable to the landscape lighting practice—**Light Dark Contrast** and **Cold Warm Contrast**. The others pertain more to color and include:

- Contrast of Hue
- Complementary Contrast
- Simultaneous Contrast
- Contrast of Saturation
- Contrast of Extension

Landscape lighting design contrast considerations:

- **Light Dark Contrast**—this is the difference between light and dark values. In art, the strong use of light dark contrast is called Chiaroscuro.
- **Cold Warm Contrast**—this exists because humans associate colors with certain experiences. We associate ‘warm’ colors with daylight and sunset, and ‘cold’ colors with overcast days, storms and winter. Also, the character of cold warm contrast can be defined differently:
 - Shady-Sunny
 - Calm-Exciting
 - Airy-Earthly
 - Near-Far
 - Light-Heavy
 - Wet-Dry

Consideration to Landscape Lighting:

When a landscape lighting designer develops a scene or setting, they must utilize light in such a way to provide contrast. It’s the degree of contrast which enhances an emotional reaction, and it is here where the developed designer shines. Colors are an important part of this, as they are usually associated with plantings, materials, and garden art.

Note: these forms of contrast should be considered when evoking emotion. The landscape lighting designer must question the intent of each space—is it meant to stimulate emotion? If so, how does the contrast of this space apply to this? This contrast element should be a consideration for ‘good’ lighting design.

3. Emphasis:

Definition:

- Emphasis is defined as an area or object within the artwork (space) that draws attention and becomes a focal point. Subordination is the act of minimizing or toning down the other compositional elements in order to bring attention to the focal point.

The emphasis of a scene or setting is usually an interruption in the fundamental *pattern* or *movement* of the viewers eye through the composition. It can also be a *break* in the *rhythm*. *Repetition* creates emphasis by calling attention to the repeated element through the sheer force of numbers. *Contrast* achieves emphasis by setting the point of emphasis apart from the rest of its background. Various kinds of *contrasts* are possible, including color, texture, shape, size or scale. The use of a neutral background isolates the point of emphasis.

There are several techniques used in creating areas of emphasis:

- Isolate the object to be emphasized
- Contrast a shape with its surroundings
- Increase an object’s intensity of color or illumination
- Create a contrast in color temperature
- Use a darker or lighter value on the object to be emphasized
- Focus attention with converging lines

As you can see, emphasis is aligned closely with *contrast*, and they work together to capture the viewers attention or understanding of the space.

Consideration to Landscape Lighting:

Landscape lighting designers need to understand the importance of emphasis because it’s crucial in providing ease and calm for those experiencing our work. Without emphasis or a targeted focal point, the viewer will experience a form of stress as the mind works to find this emphasis and understanding of the scene. This stressful condition is uncomfortable to the viewer, and this is a result of the mind questioning what is seen.

Note: if the setting or scene does not immediately direct you to the emphasis, then this element of composition does not lend itself to a ‘good’ lighting design.

4. Pattern & Rhythm:

Definitions:

- Pattern is an underlying structure, and “skeleton” of sorts that organizes the parts of a composition. It is a combination of elements or shapes repeated in a recurring and regular arrangement.
- Rhythm is defined as a strong, regular, repeated pattern of movement or sound. It’s created when one or more design elements are used repeatedly to create a feeling of organized movement.

Pattern organizes surfaces or structures in a consistent, regular manner, and it can be described as a repeating unit of shape or form. Classes of motifs or patterns include mosaics, lattices, spirals, meanders, symmetry and fractals among others.

A motif is the most basic unit or the smallest unit of pattern. Motifs are repeated in different ways to create patterns, and these patterns are repeated to create a design.

Rhythm is a principle of design that suggests movement or action. It is usually achieved through *repetition* of lines, shapes, colors and more. It creates a visual tempo in artworks and provides a path for the viewer’s eye to follow. Rhythm is achieved through linear elements, alternating elements, gradation, repetition or intricate details. *Repetition* refers to one object or shape repeated.

The following are the varying types of rhythm:

- **Regular**—occurs when the intervals between elements or the elements themselves are similar in size or length. They repeat the elements over a predictable interval.
- **Random**—occurs when similar motifs or elements repeat with no regularity. They repeat in a manner without order or a planned arrangement.
- **Progressive**—repeated elements with regular changes.
- **Flowing**—occurs when curvy positive and negative shapes are repeated and when wavy lines are repeated. It’s created by undulating elements and intervals, bending and curving motifs and spaces.
- **Alternating**—occurs when positive and negative shapes change design at regular intervals.

Consideration to Landscape Lighting:

Landscape lighting designers must address pattern & rhythm in two ways: 1) by what exists in the landscape, and 2) by how we implement the lighting design. If we analyze the landscape and its site conditions, we will find existing patterns. These are usually found in the arrangement of plantings, structures, or other items.

Many lighting designers do not consider the installation layout in a matter that impacts this element of composition. However, we need to. It can be positive and complimentary to the surrounding landscape, or it can be a negative one which poses confusion. Exposed lighting fixtures (those seen) are the biggest offender in this, and they include path lights, wall lights, and the like.

Note: excessive use of light fixtures, whether placed regularly or randomly can generate *repetition*. This can be a negative impact on the design and it's not considered, 'good' landscape lighting design.

5. Unity:

Definition:

- Unity is an important design principle that gives the artwork a sense of cohesion or coherence. It is the wholeness or completeness of a picture or setting.

In design, unity occurs when the elements in a space work together in such a way that the resulting look is balanced and harmonious. *Harmony* is accomplished by the *repetition* of a particular design element, such as **line, shape, color, texture, and space**—each of these is considered the compositional elements. This *harmony* is what creates the sense of unity.

To create unity or *harmony*, artists arrange the similar components and elements of art to create consistency. It can also be created by merging the form and the meaning of the artwork together. Unity is the sum of the compositional elements that make up the work of art. The concept of unity in art means: the *balance* and *harmony* of all the five elements.

Consideration to Landscape Lighting:

Lighting designers must remember that light must fit harmoniously into the space. In addition, we must consider this scene unity through the eyes of *balance* and *contrast* in order to provide for a positive setting.

Note: Light, as we know has an opposite—Darkness or Shadow. We must take care to provide a *balanced* approach to utilizing both light and shadow, as they can greatly impact mood or the emotional state of those experiencing the space.

6. Movement:

Definition:

- Movement is the principle of art used to create the impression of action in one's work. It can apply to a single component in a composition or to the whole composition at once. Visual movement is dependent on the other elements and principles of art.

Movement is the design element that operates in the fourth dimension—Time. And time implies change or movement, and movement implies the passage of time. It's the movement a viewer's eye takes when experiencing art, their eyes move from one element to the next.

In art, there are techniques used to create movement and include repeating art elements in regular or cyclical fashion to create interest, movement, and/or *harmony* and *unity*. The idea is to have the viewer's eye move around some but be directed to the *emphasis* or focal point. When we look at art, the artist can use bold, directional brush strokes to lead the viewer around. They also can use contrasting textures or colors, as well as *rhythmic* or repeating elements to take them on this journey.

Consideration to Landscape Lighting:

How should landscape lighting designers effectively use movement as an advantage? This can be done through the understanding of how light sources, as well as the fixtures themselves can encourage eye movement. If light fixtures are grouped in a linear fashion, the eye will naturally wish to "follow" these illuminated works. We must question, "Do they lead somewhere and is this good or bad?" Lighting designers must consider this psychological impact.

Note: Landscape lighting designers have the ability to vary color at the source, which is another consideration and it will change the feel of the space. If we do not take the time to understand these impacts, then it can easily ruin an otherwise, 'good' landscape lighting design.

Final Thoughts

Never before has the landscape lighting design profession considered their works on the same level as art. This is an advancement in and of itself, and we should all be encouraged by it. If we allow ourselves to raise-the-bar in this manner, it will support those performing 'good' lighting design through peer recognition. This is critically important for the future generations to come.

We all need to find ways to encourage lighting design professionalism, and this guide should help to pave the way in doing so. Awards programs are a means to recognize and reward good behavior, as well as practice. Those judging these programs must be respected, if they are to mean anything. Respect can only be ensured by proven experience and knowledgeable understanding of this art-form. This Guide is a means to measure 'good' landscape lighting design—that's all it is. One must be dedicated and passionate enough to perform at this level.