



STEPPING OUT

Simple solutions for lighting steps and changes in levels



Garden illumination has multiple functions. **Robert Webber** discusses lighting options for steps and multi-tiered gardens from a practical and aesthetic perspective

One area of lighting that always presents a challenge is subtly but sufficiently lighting steps and changes in levels. This was highlighted to me recently when a client called upon our expertise after having his garden lit by a recommended installer. He wasn't happy with the finished product and the installer had suddenly gone AWOL. The garden was on three levels and while walking up the central steps the client tripped, landed against the top step and dislocated his jaw, smashed his glasses and badly cut his hand! Not my average meeting. A quick trip back to my van produced a couple of towels, first aid kit and sutures. Enough of a 'patch up' until I dropped him at A&E.

The issue was the way in which the steps had been lit. The recessed hooded lights had been placed too low down, causing a nasty shadow to the riser and overhang of the step. So you couldn't see where the tread finished and the riser started.

Step lighting comes under the layer of functional lighting, one of the three basic 'must light' areas we always seek to address. The others are feature lighting (covered in a previous article) and aesthetic lighting. There are a few standard methods of lighting that we employ.

- 1 Hooded lights recessed in the side retaining walls to cast light down onto the step without the glare into your eyes.
- 2 Linear LED strip lighting under a step to downlight the risers and the treads below.
- 3 Architectural bollard or post lights to cast light back towards the steps, this helps illuminate the dangerous shadow that can occur.

An alternative to standard hooded lights is a more architecturally pleasing light like the layered glass and stainless light (below). We often specify these on more contemporary projects. They are hand made by Gwyn Carless Designs based in Derbyshire, which can make any bespoke light we require.



Another alternative is the Smile in-light by Wever & Ducré (below). These lights work best against more contemporary hard landscape materials. We recently completed a commission with Joe Perkins, landscape architect for Longview Design, using Wever & Ducré lights. The whole effect was stunning and complemented his design perfectly.



Linear lighting is a favourite of mine. I love the effect it gives down the riser and the way it washes across the tread. When we mention bollard lighting, designers often cringe until they see the way it's changed in the last few years.

I specified this light (right) for an exclusive villa we lit in the Caribbean a few years ago for Frank Lloyd Wright. We installed the lighting on a scene setting control system. As the client moved through the garden the lights intensified in brightness for a while before dimming back down to 25% luminance.

The shadows cast were dramatic.

When your client asks you to 'step up' and help create something beautiful, don't forget to think about lighting those key areas so the garden is just as usable at night as it is in the day. If you plan to use linear LED lighting under the step overhang then design an overhang of approximately 35mm to accept the light and receptor.

If the steps are framed on each side by small walls remember that the light will be most effective at approximately 25mm up from the tread top, so make sure the walls are high enough to accommodate this.

If the design uses bollard lighting these can be placed in planting pockets along the edge of the steps to avoid the light becoming a hazard. Most bollard lights can illuminate an area three times their height, so a 500mm light will concentrate most light within 1.5m. So, check out, step up and be light years ahead.



ABOUT ROBERT WEBBER

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