



Inspired by **Susan Quirke**

AFTER A DECADE THAT INSET ROW UPON ROW of spotlights into blank ceilings, mood lighting is back and it's taking a leap into the future. "Lighting is the most important aspect of any scheme," says Susan Quirke, who runs an interior design company near London Bridge. "You can design a scheme with the most expensive materials and finishes, but without a well thought-out lighting scheme to highlight and complement the materials and the room, the scheme is unfinished."

"I've been to loads of properties where the lighting makes the space feel depressing. Good lighting can make you feel better. Lighting is the soul of any project... it creates the mood and can be changed."

Lighting design is a speciality at the Quirke McNamara design consultancy, but once people have changed overhead light bulbs for a painterly flow of colour washes over their walls, they are so impressed that they often ask Susan Quirke to do more.

Susan is Quirke McNamara Consultancy's creative director and she personally designs all the interiors for QMC's clients. Minor updating is not the usual scope of her schemes: complete transformation is the likely outcome. Even when she is called in as a lighting consultant to add a few lighting features to illuminate a kitchen worktop, put the spotlight on a piece of artwork on the walls, or revive a nightclub, she is inevitably asked to stay and rethink the interior design.



An award winning interior design project at the Ice White House is a case in point. Quirke McNamara Consultancy was asked to do some lighting for a new kitchen being installed in a family home. When Susan Quirke arrived on the scene, the project was being handled piecemeal by various contractors doing the building work, electrics, carpentry and decorating, with occasional visits by the architect to see how they were doing. It wasn't going well and the owners were finding it stressful to manage.

The kitchen was to be a vision in white: white walls, white Tsunami Corian worktops. The owners were proud of their new kitchen but they knew an icy white backdrop would look cold so they wanted dramatic lighting to give it some atmosphere. "I set LED lighting above the Corian kitchen to wash the walls with colour changing light, and set lights under the floating units to cast light across the floors," says Susan.

A jaded, mock Tudor, developers' 'executive home' built 15 years ago, Susan describes it as originally "dark and gloomy and old-fashioned". Somehow, conversations about light in the home expanded the QMC brief from a few light fittings in the kitchen to coming up with a coherent interior scheme and taking over the project management. Enthused by the vision of extending the dazzling white Modernism of their new kitchen throughout their home, the scope of the job expanded to re-engineering the whole house in space age white.



"I'm not known for white interiors! People know I use colour," says Susan, "but that made it all the more interesting. We stayed for a year and a half, with 40 builders, decorators and electricians working on the project; we had up to 15 decorators on site at one time. It was a highly technical project."

The scheme added an extension and a loft conversion to house the master bedroom in the attic, a swimming pool, cinema, and five bathrooms, one with fibre-optic light fittings inset in the floor around the bath to emphasise the sculptural shape of the bath.

The first step was to bring in daylight and take out the narrow wooden staircase and install a futuristic helical white glass staircase, beamed in from a space ship. Susan designed a crystal droplet chandelier suspended down into the stairwell, taking practical factors into consideration as strongly as the visual effect. The family has four children, aged between three and fifteen, and they like throwing parties, so with a house full of toddlers and teenagers, the chandelier had to be safe enough for little fingers – it's irresistible to reach over and touch it.

What about the practicality of four kids and their friends in an all-white space with white poured-resin floors? "It's all wipe clean – just wipe and go," Susan breezes. "I wouldn't specify materials that won't stand the test of time. I like glass walls because you can wipe them down. I never use fiddly materials like mosaics, or impractical surfaces that won't last, like crystal wallpaper – it seems glamorous at first but the crystals flake off, and then they look tatty."

QMC re-clad the exterior of the house, landscaped tropical gardens, designed lighting for the swimming pool and uplighters among the plants. QMC's technical director Patrick McNamara oversaw the ambitious audiovisual specifications of installing a cinema, 26 television screens throughout the house and sound speakers in every room.

The hardest task was the aquarium in the basement, where the client wanted a water wall and illuminated tropical fishtanks around the walls of an indoor swimming pool. "It was tricky working with so much water and reflective glass surfaces, to blend the lighting in a space with no natural light to make the space work in the day and the evening, and to create a dramatic scheme within the fish tanks, taking the welfare of the fish into consideration," says Susan. "There were different themes, from a Gothic tank where I had to create very low mood lighting, to tropical tanks. The logistics were complicated, and we had to ship the fish tanks from India."

Some people might describe these logistics as a 'nightmare' but Susan Quirke's secret is that, overlaying her perfectionism, she has a breezy touch that makes light work of complicated technicalities while insisting that the brief is achieved.

The in-house cinema is the owner's inner sanctum after work as a director in a City bank. The cinema has black resin flooring, black textured wall paper, in dramatic contrast with the rest of the house, a fibre-optic starlit ceiling, soft velvety seating pods, and a purple curved love seat bespoke designed by Susan in her recognisable design 'handwriting'.



Holding the image of the whole scheme in her mind, Susan Quirke was possibly the only person on site who wasn't startled by the end result. The family was even more delighted to see their dream home nominated for an award. "Even the builders said "I didn't think it would be so good." Builders always say it's impossible," Susan laughs. "We make it possible by being on site every day, guiding the process."

The Ice White House was shortlisted for Residential Lighting Project of the year 2010 in the Lighting Design Awards. Previous award winning QMC schemes were for interior design: Susan Quirke won Kitchen Designer of the Year for the Loft in Bermondsey, and Bathroom Designer of the Year for a backlit glass bathroom in Bloomsbury.

"Commercial spaces need to be eye-catching and create an instant impact, whether by a neon sign or a chandelier in an atrium, for a boardroom, company reception, or a nightclub. Fabio Novembre, an Italian designer who works on nightclubs, always does something a bit unexpected, which I admire. He incorporated a feature glass wall that had been shattered by bullets into an otherwise very glamorous interior, which was something a bit leftfield.

"Residential projects are much more personal to the client. I spend a lot of time discussing how they want to use the space, taking everyone into consideration. You should never go for design over life. The key is to get inside the client's head," says Susan, whose degree is in English and psychology.



"I'm known to work in a very modern style, with very sleek materials – people use the words 'space age' a lot. People love the lighting, it captures the imagination as the mood created with colour lighting is instant and if you only want pure white light then the other settings can be turned off. I try to blend the internal and external lighting, say on a roof terrace, blending jewel-like colours between the sculptural plants and the colours of the interior."

The Loft in Bermondsey is recognisably Susan Quirke's design style. The materials are rich in colour and texture and rich in quality; dark oak flooring giving warmth to the open plan space, and intense coloured lighting creating intimacy and character in lieu of 'stuff'. Most people have a clear out and start afresh with a QMC interior.

"The Loft had a galley kitchen – so narrow the owner could stand and touch both walls – and the space was dark; there was no lighting, just one strip light under the cupboards. It had a dungeon feeling!" says Susan. Originally there were six light fittings. "In the evening when talking to the client we couldn't even see what we were discussing, so the final scheme has 70 fittings to make the space work properly! There are other schemes where a much smaller number of fittings can create great impact.

"I always insist on spending a day looking at the space so I can create a scheme for day and night. Then I do nothing for two weeks, just think about it. A white wall will light totally differently from a brick one, a double height mezzanine will light totally differently from a penthouse with floor to ceiling windows."





In the Loft, QMC opened up the space beneath the mezzanine floor and replaced plasterboard walls with glass panels to bring in much more light. A breakfast bar between the kitchen and living area makes the space comfortable for entertaining.

“It’s a bachelor pad, with smoky grey tiles and black granite worktop,” Susan says. She contrasts the materials with those for a lawyer’s penthouse apartment in the City with its breathtaking views over to the Gherkin. Deep red glass splashbacks, a curvilinear breakfast bar and sparkled quartz worktops add glamour, mystique and intimacy.

The Penthouse guest room is a fantasy scene, a purple leather bed set on a plinth, lit from beneath to appear as if floating on air. The owner’s bedroom is more subtle, with a silver and glass bed and a starlit ceiling. A lighting feature of a lunar eclipse is a compelling art installation created by Quirke.

The Penthouse’s two bathrooms are designed as his and hers spaces; one has a sophisticated feminine feel, with silver mirrored glass inspired by a cherished vintage washstand, the other is a masculine power shower in a black glass wet room.

“If someone says they want a bathroom like one they saw in a New York hotel, I’ll push them to do something different,” says Susan. “I ask them what it was that they liked about it, and we’ll design something new.

“When I’m recommended by an existing client, their friends have spent time in their space and want me to push the boundaries, which I love as I don’t want to design the space thing over and over, I want to create something unique for each client that matches their personality. I’m lucky to have had great clients that trust me to create something dramatic but also practical.”





Forecasting trends for the coming decade, Susan Quirke predicts homes awash with colour. “Chromatherapy was a buzz word a while back but now there are loads of products that incorporate lighting. Colour light taps and showers, taps that start with a blue light when you turn them on, changing to red when the water is hot, illuminated baths that change colour, lights set into showerheads that illuminate the water as it cascades down... are all much more readily available now. LED lighting is becoming more popular with 50,000 hours’ life with no bulbs to change.”

Susan Quirke is also certain lighting will become a conscious part of the design scheme. “Lighting will be taken more seriously as an integral part of a scheme, not just as an afterthought. Bars and nightclubs have to attract people, and a lighting scheme creates a mood that brings people back to restaurants. At home people will experiment with lighting, not just stick with the standard spotlight; they will bring in nightclub lighting on a more subtle scale.”

She looks everywhere but other interiors for ideas. “I like how Vogue New York style shoots. You can be inspired by a tiny detail such as a butterfly and base a whole concept and design around it. I’d love to do the lighting for a Galliano show.”

Cityscapes are another inspiration. “I’m interested in the building of buildings. The practicalities of what will be a beautiful sculptural building fascinate me, the everyday story. I get inspired by watching the building process, how each day a new challenge is overcome. My favourite city in the world is Barcelona.. I don’t stay in the Arts Hotel... I’ll pick a random little hotel with a roof terrace so I can watch the cranes.”

Susan Quirke gets ideas from walking around the South Bank, watching building developments in the Shard, looking at civic water features and lighting from the bus. “Southwark council has commissioned LED colour lighting under the bridges and archways; it gives the area personality and makes you smile,” she says. “Even a dodgy back alley in Bermondsey can be a source of inspiration.”

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