



WESTCOAST LIGHTING INSIDER

Eric Johnson's Lighting Design Brings the "Home" to Contemporary Residential and Hospitality Architecture

by Lois I. Hutchinson | Oct 22, 2019 | WCLI Feature Article



Eric Johnson credits his father, Merlin Johnson, with ensuring a thorough lighting education for his sons; his brothers all worked in the Bay Area lighting industry at some point. "My dad started his own lighting business in 1969 – when it was all learning on the job – designing and installing lighting. We were involved with the whole process, from layouts and drawings to

modifying and customizing fixtures to create whatever lighting effects we were going for. It was a full, rounded education from the ground up."

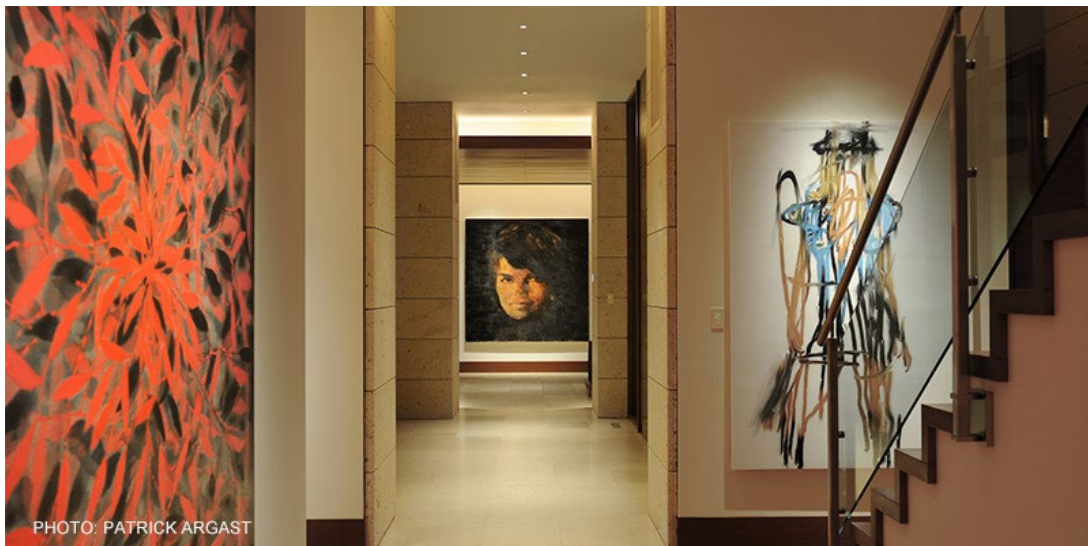
The company also fabricated residential framing projectors (the [Merlin Light](#)) and specialized in highly integrated lighting and "seamless" artwork illumination, which brought in high-end Bay Area and international projects. "We got to be involved with some pretty incredible projects and lit some amazing art collections," Johnson recalled.

The firm worked with some of the top designers of the day. Johnson mentioned Michael Taylor and Val Arnold: "Some were more on the modern side; some were highly traditional.... You would get the full mix of styles, but nobody wanted to see the lighting." Ceiling apertures were minimal, and the Johnsons fabricated striplighting from festoon lamps to hide in coves and integrate into casework.

A lifetime Bay Area resident, Johnson has worked steadily in residential and hospitality lighting design over the past two decades, developing the [EJA Lighting Design](#) lighting aesthetic with firms across the region and the globe. He enjoys 20–25 year relationships with locals [Backen & Gillam Architects](#) and [Walker Warner Architects](#). As architectural styles evolve, Johnson stands by his father's motto: *If you notice the lighting, it's probably wrong.*

For our "portfolio tour" Johnson has selected a variety of projects, including local wineries, that showcase his strategies for "welcoming" lighting design that presents a warm, lantern-like appeal. These projects articulate a balance between emphasizing architectural elements and materials while serving functional lighting needs and occupant comfort.

Warmly washing interior finishes and highlighting architectural planes, deployed strategically, bring a levity to the architecture and mystique to the contemporary hospitality spaces Johnson lights. By minimizing any dazzle or glare, the architecture's extensive glazing can often serve to bring the outdoors in. "The lighting is highly integrated, and it's really about the architecture, the art and the interiors," Johnson explained. EJA's goal is to create deceptively simple, beautiful lighted environments, without really noticing the lighting.



Napa Residence: Balancing brightnesses with discreet apertures

This modern house shows how recessed lighting with low-glare trims and louvers can minimize stray light and maximize the lighting's intention. In this particular space the lighting opens up the art instead of the architecture by [Backen & Gillam](#), with only an uplit ceiling beckoning at the end of the hallway. "As you look at the space, you're not seeing big holes in the ceiling or glare," Johnson said. "The key with all these jobs is the balance of highlighting. The architecture does have a little light on the wall, but it's more focused on the art."

In other spaces in the home, the lighting gives more equitable attention to architectural elements. Johnson approaches this balance in schematic lighting design phases, then often works closely with owners during final focus and controls programming to set scenes and ensure comfort.



Napa Barn: Bringing the outdoors in

Mirrored walls expand a relatively narrow view of outdoors, inviting the landscape into this clever residential entertainment space by [William Duff Architects](#). The pendants provide some task light, but subtle indirect lighting from the slats of the old barn's roof permits the view. "The landscape lighting – our first project with LEDs – is a bit cooler and brighter than normal to draw the eye to the outward." To maintain the warmth of finishes and furnishings Johnson generally works in 2700 to 3000K, testing new light sources and fixtures in his office.



Peninsula Residence: Highlighting the warmth in modern design

"This a good example of how the surfaces make such a difference," Johnson said of this indoor-outdoor living space. Classic modern architecture, featuring abundant glass and white finishes, can feel a bit stark. But **Turnbull Griffin Haesloop** brought wood into the eaves and casework of this residence: opportunities for Johnson to emphasize the warmth you're looking for at home. "There's a lot of light coming out, that's reflecting off the light-colored stone onto the underside of the wood eaves. We're not directly lighting the wood here, but sometimes you don't need to." Square-aperture downlights at 3000K reinforce that strategy.



Dierberg Vineyard: Concealed lighting adds mystique

In some cases, architectural detailing provides opportunities for small sources to be tucked in here and there. The barrels at the Dierberg winery conceal small fixtures highlighting the columns; at the capital, small fixtures accent the architectural detailing. There's something about an "unknown" source of light, used to strategically define the volume of the space, that creates a levity, an almost dreamy quality. "With the work lights turned off, there's still enough light to take winery tours through and 'wow' the people. This [lighting controls] preset has got some mystery to it, some drama," Johnson said.



Silver Oak Winery: Seemingly simple, award-winning lighting

The deceptively clean, simple lighting of the Silver Oak Winery exemplifies Johnson's lighting design aesthetic. Largely hidden lighting floats the architectural planes to expand the apparent volume and celebrate the architecture and materials. For this LEED Platinum project, Johnson earned the first-place Award of Distinction at the 2019 LUX Awards presented by the San Francisco Section of the Illuminating Engineering Society. Silver Oak Winery went on to win an Award of Excellence for Interior Lighting Design at the IES Illumination Awards.

Piechota Architecture LLC culminates that pastiche of contemporary and rustic that defines the "California winery aesthetic." The lantern-like welcome provides a warm, hospitable appeal to the traditional, barn-inspired tasting room. "Accenting the ceiling, that continues with the same material through the exterior overhangs, was a theme of this project," Johnson said. "We couldn't uplight the trees because of the code restrictions, so we uplit the overhang from ground level. The reflected warm light contrasts nicely with the charcoal exterior. It's more inviting at the entry points, and then takes that same look all the way through the interior."

This lightness with a tinge of mystery is achieved by hiding lights behind casework and inside toekicks. Johnson worked closely with the architect to develop custom slots in the wood ceiling. These conceal numerous circuits of track lighting that accent the tasting bar and displays, and softly wash the concrete board-form walls. "It's a very simple approach but complicated

when it comes to making it all work," he added. "There's no decorative pendants, no sconces, no sparkle. It's about lighting the broad planes of the architecture."

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