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Notes on light

and how a room feels after dark

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A short issue about a thing most people never choose on purpose. Nothing here is a health claim and nothing here is a sales pitch. Where we are not sure, we say so.

01 One light, in the ceiling

Almost every room most of us have ever rented came with the same lighting plan: one fitting, dead centre, on the ceiling. It is there because it is the cheapest way to meet a building rule, not because anyone thought about what the room would be used for.

A single overhead source does a specific thing. It lights the floor well, the walls badly, and faces from above, which is the least flattering angle there is. It flattens a room out. Everything is evenly lit and nothing has any depth, which is fine for finding a dropped key and wrong for almost everything else.

The fix is not more light. It is light in more places. Two or three small sources at different heights will make a room feel better than one bright one ever will, and between them they usually draw less power.

You can test this tonight without buying anything. Turn the ceiling light off and turn on whatever lamps you already own. Most people find the room immediately feels larger and calmer, and that is only because the light stopped coming from one point above their head.

02 Warm before bright

Colour temperature is measured in kelvin and it runs backwards from what you would expect. Low numbers are warm and orange. High numbers are cool and blue. A candle sits around 1800K. An old incandescent bulb is about 2700K. Midday daylight is 5500K to 6500K.

A room lit at 2700K in the evening reads as calm. The same room at 6000K reads as a corridor in a hospital. Neither bulb is better than the other; they are for different times of day and different jobs.

The rough rule we work to: warm and dim after dark, cooler and brighter for work and for mornings. Where a light here offers a choice of colour temperature, the option is on the product page, and where it does not, it is warm.

Brightness matters more than most people think and in the opposite direction to what they assume. Once a room has enough light to move around safely, extra brightness stops helping and starts making the room feel like a place you are passing through rather than sitting in.

03 What light actually does to you

This is the part where a lighting shop usually starts making claims, so here is the honest version.

> *Light is the main signal your body uses to work out what time it is.*

Light is the main signal your body uses to work out what time it is. Cells in the eye that have nothing to do with vision feed straight into the part of the brain that runs the body clock. That system is real, it is well documented, and it responds mostly to how bright the light is and when it arrives, not to how nice it looks.

The two useful facts that follow: bright light early in the day helps anchor the clock, and bright light late at night pushes it later. Evening light suppresses melatonin, and the brighter and bluer it is, the more it does so. Dimming the lights in the last hour or two before bed is a sensible thing to do, and it is about the easiest change anyone can make.

What that does not mean is that a bedside lamp is a medical device. Light therapy for seasonal low mood uses purpose-built boxes at around 10,000 lux, used in the morning, for a set time. A table lamp is nowhere near that and will not do that job. If you are dealing with a mood or sleep problem that is not shifting, that is a conversation for a doctor, not a shopping decision.

Where a lamp does make a genuine difference is smaller and less dramatic: whether a room is somewhere you want to be in the evening, whether you can get up at night without a light in your eyes, and whether the last hour of your day is spent under something soft or under a ceiling panel. Those are worth getting right on their own terms.

04 Where to put a lamp so it gets used

The lamps that get used are the ones within arm's reach of wherever a person actually sits. That sounds obvious and it is still the most common mistake: a beautiful lamp on a sideboard nobody walks past, switched on twice a year.

Start with the places you stop. Beside the bed. Beside the chair you read in. At the end of the kitchen bench where you stand. Those are the three that earn their keep in most homes.

Then the places you move through in the dark. A hallway, the top or bottom of a stair, the inside of a wardrobe. These are the spots where a battery-powered wall light with a motion sensor makes more sense than anything wired, because they are exactly the places nobody ever ran a switch to.

Height matters. Below eye level when seated, and the light is soft. Above it, and you see the source itself, which is glare. If you can see the bulb from where you sit, the lamp is either too high or it needs a deeper shade.

One more: put something in the corners. A room lit only in the middle looks smaller than it is. A low

light in a corner pushes the walls back out.

05 The hour before bed

If you only change one thing, change the last hour.

> *If you only change one thing, change the last hour.*

Turn the ceiling light off. Put on one or two low lamps instead. Warm, dim, below eye level. It takes about five seconds and it is the single biggest difference you can make to how the end of a day feels.

Screens matter less than people are told, but they are not nothing. A phone at arm's length puts far less light into your eyes than a lit room does, so the room is the bigger lever. Dimming both is better than arguing about which one counts.

For getting up in the night, the goal is to see the floor without waking yourself properly. A very dim warm light low down does it. An overhead light does not, and you will be awake for the next forty minutes finding out.

None of this is a sleep cure. It is just the difference between a room that helps and a room that works against you.

06 Making a room feel like somewhere you want to be

Lighting designers talk about layers, which sounds like jargon and is not. It means three jobs, done by different fittings: enough light to move around, focused light where you do something, and light that exists only to make the room look good.

Most homes have the first one and nothing else. Adding either of the other two changes a room more than new furniture would, for a fraction of the cost.

Bounce light off something. A lamp pointed at a wall or a ceiling gives you a soft wash with no visible source. Sconces that throw light up and down do this by design, which is why they suit hallways and stairs so well.

Aim for warmth that matches across the room. Two lamps at obviously different colour temperatures in the same space look like a mistake, because they are.

And leave some of the room darker. Even lighting is what makes an office feel like an office. Contrast is what makes a room feel like a home.



Written in the shop, between other jobs. If a light here did not do what we said it would, tell us and it goes in the next issue.

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