

DIM THE LIGHTS, PLEASE

Lighting and paper artist Jenny Pinto says that it is time we reduce the intensity of light that surrounds us most of the time and bring back the romance of shadows into our living spaces



Photograph: JUAN HITTERS/SURPRESS AGENCY.COM

It took almost two years of doggedly pursuing equipment makers in Haryana and hunting down banana fibre suppliers in Tamil Nadu before I could finally start designing paper lights at my Bangalore-based paper-making studio in 2000. Later that year, on a paper trail to the US, I landed up amidst the treasures of a second hand bookstore. There, I spotted a book, and even before turning a page, I knew that its title had given me the theme for my adventures in light and paper.

In Praise of Shadows is a slim little book that was written by Japanese novelist Junichiro Tanizaki in 1933. The book is not really about lighting but a meditation on the aesthetics of shadows in Japanese culture. In it, Tanizaki discusses how the Japanese, “find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness.” He talks about Japanese interiors, art, gardens, black lacquerware, food and even toilets, which he says, are all designed to embrace shadows.

The book set me thinking about the qualities of light and the way we think about light and darkness. To me, shadows are like a pause or rest in a music score or like the silence before dawn. However, being a light designer in an increasingly prosperous and urban India has highlighted a sad irony for me. We are still a country where the majority live with very little or no electricity but those of us who do, want excessive, overlit spaces.

We have forgotten the poetry and magic of shadows that influenced oriental cultures. Traditional Indian design is replete with examples of how we used light and shadow. The simple lota, stepwell, traditional courtyard house, jalli window, even the sari and the humble dhoti are full of enticing, rich shadows that change with movement and the shifting light of day.



The same room is designed to allow for play of natural light during the day and lit warmly, using highlights during the night

MISSING SHADOWS

Today however, as Indian cities race towards the energy consuming, bright neon lights of prosperity, we have lost sight of the subtle, the implied and the diffused. Along with many other things, our idea of lighting too has been influenced by the excessiveness of the West. Over-lit offices, malls and even homes, uniformly bright airports—bright seems to be better, but in the process we have forgotten the eloquence of shadows. Think about candlelit dinners, diyas on Diwali, moonlight dancing through the canopy of a tree, moving out of the city and into the countryside just to gaze at stars and you will know what we are missing out.

MAXIMISE NATURAL LIGHT

When it comes to lighting up personal spaces, my guiding principle is 'less is more' for two reasons. The first: The poetics of light and the freedom that low-intensity light sources can bring to lighting design. The second: Efficiency. Minimal energy consumption just has to be at the top of one's mind when lighting up spaces these days.

I strongly believe lighting transforms a house into a home. So, let's for a moment, look at the two kinds of lights we need.

First, the natural light. If you are lucky enough to build your own home, make sure your design maximises natural light. Air and natural light are very conducive to good energy levels and body

rhythms. Unfortunately, most of us do not have much of a choice at the work place. I wish more architects considered growing evidence that in offices, high levels and wrong colours of light and the separation from natural rhythms of daylight can affect one's health.

LIGHT UP AS PER NEED

Coming back to the home, besides natural light, you will also need a fair amount of artificial lights. But before you decide on that, it's important you think about how you use a particular room. Is it a space for entertainment? Or to lounge and listen to music? Or to eat, sleep, or maybe just read? Each room in the house is used differently, so approach the lighting individually. Light up only those areas that need it and don't be afraid to leave the rest in shadow.

Instead of flood lighting or evenly lighting up the entire room, think highlights. Make specific work areas in the room, like kitchen counter, desk, dining table, dressing table, reading corner (which could be your bed) bright enough to do your task efficiently and leave the other nooks



Photograph courtesy: AXO LIGHT

in dimmer light. Remember, the task needs to be brightly lit (the book, the food, etc.) not your face, unless of course you are in front of the bathroom mirror!

Keep the rooms you lounge around in and entertain in, dappled with an interesting interplay of light and shadow. As you move from one room to another, if you go through a shadowy area before you come into a brighter one, the room sort of 'lights up' for you. Your choice of furniture, colours and artefacts should complement this light-shadow interplay. Use light accents and light up that special piece of art or artefact.

Outside, line the path with low level lights. No floodlights in the garden, please! Just wash certain trees and plants

with subtle light, hiding the fixtures cleverly so that there is no glare. Often, a pendant light over an outdoor bar/table or barbeque is all you need. That way, you'll enjoy the moonshine and the sound of chirping crickets. Have you ever noticed how you only hear crickets chirp in the dark? Turn on the light and the sound stops.

SHOP FOR THE RIGHT LIGHT

When shopping for light, you should keep in mind design, material, light intensity and colour. The Indian market is full of lighting options and thanks to China, you might even get cheaper versions of designer lights from Europe. There are a growing number of Indian lighting designers as well and you will find quite a choice of materials, designs and various kinds of lights.

As a rule of thumb, homes generally look better with diffused light and I find a paper shade does the best job compared to glass or acrylic (although fabric comes close). The soothing glow of paper makes even a dull room look warm and inviting, and there's a better chance no one will

"Shadows are intrinsic to my design. All the lights have shadows within them... patches of shadows that contrast with the warm glow of banana fibre paper, that not just glows warmly, but lights whatever is close by warmly as well."

notice the stain on my sofa or the laugh lines appearing around my eyes! Besides, paper shades can be teamed up with bases that are made of stainless steel, wood, ceramic or stone. It's really up to you to choose a material that best complements your interiors. Then again, play around with the levels at which you place lights. Go for a mix of wall, table, ceiling and floor light, depending on the room and how you use it. For instance, a soft defused table or floor light near a seating area lights up the face gently compared to a down-lighter above the sofa that will create bags under the eyes. A wall light in the passage or entrance lobby is more practical.

If you have young children or a pet and don't want to use a low level light, then the wall lights should be up-lighters or well diffused so they don't cast harsh shadows.

GET THE RIGHT INTENSITY AND COLOUR

When it comes to light intensity, in the areas that can do with low lighting, make sure you use low wattage CFLs. Task lights for reading, dining, cooking, etc need to be brighter. Here, it's better to go with lights that are designed for the task so that the task is effectively lit, without casting a harsh glare or shadow. When it comes to light colour, warm yellow works best even for task lighting at home. Thankfully, you can get warm yellow in tube lights, CFLs and LEDs quite easily these days.

If you have the budget, a light sculpture makes a statement. A quirky lamp adds an interesting twist. A brightly coloured or patterned shade can spice up a room. A bold stroke can be made as well with a light as with any other artefact. But above all, approach lighting intuitively and thoughtfully and don't be afraid to be adventurous. Throw in a funky light here and an abstract one there; the effect will surprise you.

Let me leave you with a passage from Tanizaki's book: "But what produces such differences in taste? In my opinion it is this: We Orientals tend to seek our satisfactions in whatever surroundings we happen to find ourselves in, to content ourselves with things as they are; and so darkness causes us no discontent. We resign ourselves to it as inevitable. If light is scarce then light is scarce; we will immerse ourselves in the darkness and there discover its own particular beauty. But the progressive Westerner is determined always to better his lot. From candle to oil lamp, oil lamp to gaslight, gaslight to electric light—his quest for a brighter light never ceases. He spares no pains to eradicate even the minutest shadow."



Lamps with paper shades by Jenny Pinto