

HOME

INTERIORS

DESIGNERS ILLUMINATE ROOMS WITH SWITCHED-ON THINKING

Most people give priority to furniture when designing their homes but lighting should be top of the list, experts say

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Chandeliers are almost always too small for a space, oil-rubbed shades on a lamp can cast the most appealing light and dimmers are vastly under-rated.

Top lighting experts agree that for many homeowners and apartment dwellers, lighting—the location and intensity of it—has traditionally been an after-thought, with the design aspect of lighting only coming into play after the couches and carpets have been picked.

But that is slowly changing, with lighting becoming statement pieces and as designers increasingly educate their clients about the ambience-enhancing value of a strategically placed floor lamp.

“The technical aspects of lighting should be considered from the very beginning – say, if there will be recessed lighting,” said Thomas Fuchs, a New York-based designer and founder of high-end lighting and accessory brand Otium, who has created lighting for the Venetian and Bellagio hotels in Las Vegas.

“But the truth of the matter is, I have no problem—other than if I am custom-making something—with lighting being decided at the last minute. I consider it as kind of the jewellery of the project, an accessory.”

Still, Fuchs—who also designs barware and other home accessories that are retailed through Amo Eno at the IFC mall in Hong Kong—says that many people in the throes of designing their spaces go into “almost like crisis



Tino Kwan believes a space needs functional, ambient and accent lighting. Photo: Tino Kwan

mode” when the time comes to figure out the lighting.

“The rug is down, the sofas are in place, and then they realise that lamps are needed. Or they realise there is not enough light, or too much.”

Or sometimes, it’s the lack of nuance in the lighting of a particular space that ruin the experience of a room.

“In Hong Kong, it’s common that most people put one light fixture in the ceiling centre of each room... to provide general illumination,” said Tino Kwan, one of Hong Kong’s best-known lighting designers, who has worked on the region’s finest private homes, clubs, hotels and shops.

Instead, said Kwan, homeowners should aim to incorporate more than one light source in each space, allowing there to be ambient lighting, functional lighting (for, say, reading) and accent lighting.

“It helps to enhance a space to provide depth and visual comfort for the owner,” he said. “No matter what space I am designing for,

I always stand by one rule: introduce adequate light to where you need it and less where you don’t.”

Designers largely agree that the impact lighting can have on a space is often under-rated, which perhaps explains why it is often given less of a budget than furniture or wall coverings.

“The biggest mistakes are not investing enough and not providing enough control of the light to truly make it functional,” said Grant Preisser, associate vice-president for the Hong Kong facility of SCAD—the Savannah College of Art and Design.

For Fuchs, colour is a crucial component of lighting; his Otium line is made in Murano, Italy.

“Everything I do is in colour,” he says. “So it’s perfectly fine with the lamp being one of the last thoughts of the room, because that’s when you can add whimsy and colour, can increase or decrease the scale. When you choose the lamps first, then lay down the rug or put the sofa

down, regardless of how good the designer’s vision or imagination

of it as a secondary design element. It is, however, the starting point. Lighting establishes the mood of the environment and is able to dictate everything from the colour tones of the walls to the suppleness of the furniture.”

Chang says that he tends to see the same mistakes that people make when outfitting their homes with lighting, including leaving an overhead ceiling halogen bulb in a room as the primary lighting source.

“Nothing is more flattening and unflattering than a purely utilitarian light source,” he said. “It leaves all the opportunity for beauty out of the home.”

Fuchs is a big fan of the dramatic chandelier, and says that in about 75 per cent of his custom work as a designer, he is brought in from the beginning to see the space and give the client his insight on the scale of the lighting in the context of the room.

“One of the biggest mistakes made for chandeliers is that people choose one that is too small. I’ve never seen a chandelier that is too big,” he says.

Still, he’s had to be flexible as he navigates design needs.

“I once had a client with an amazing old master painting behind the dining table, and had to create a chandelier in a linear design so it wouldn’t conflict with the painting,” he said. He made an eight-armed chandelier in clear glass with a simple centre shaft. “It took second place to the painting, which is what we were going for.”

Andrew Chris, founder of New York-based OLighting, says he looks to brands such as Kartell, Artemide and Flos for accessible, modern and on-trend lighting—although he suggests people hew as much as possible to timeless silhouettes instead of going for something overtly faddish.

“And it’s important to consider the lighting source, depending on the location of the fixture,” he said. “Changing 20 incandescent bulbs on a chandelier 20 feet above floor level is not ideal.”

Nothing is more flattening and unflattering than a utilitarian light source

ERIC CHANG, HELLMAN-CHANG

is, seeing it in context is always the best.”

Eric Chang, a partner at New York-based design firm Hellman-Chang, said that “lighting can completely make or break a home”. When he walks into a space for the first time, he says, he immediately notices “how thoughtful the design is in respect to setting the ambience and what mood I’m immediately put into. Is it lively? Is it cool and calm? Is it warm and cosy?”

“Most homeowners probably put lighting towards the bottom of their list,” he said. “Many think

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