

HOME & GARDEN

Making Dark Rooms Glow

By ELAINE LOUIE JAN. 24, 2008

AT home, where we cook and eat, sleep and dream, read and entertain, lighting has to be flexible, unlike the purposefully soft, romantic lighting in a restaurant or the dark, dramatic lighting in a nightclub.

“You can’t borrow ideas from the commercial and apply them” wholesale to residential settings, said Linnaea Tillett, the principal of Tillett Lighting Design in Brooklyn. “In a private space, you expect to have flexibility.” Generally speaking, lighting designers strive for a certain consistency in lighting.

“Our eyes don’t like to deal with extreme contrast,” Ms. Tillett said. “A lot of contrast creates eye exhaustion. You want to diminish contrast in a room that people will be in for a long time.”

To eliminate contrast and create balanced light in a room, there should be at least three kinds of lighting, according to lighting experts like Randall Whitehead, the author of “Residential Lighting: A Practical Guide” (John Wiley & Sons, 2004).

Soft, indirect ambient light should illuminate the whole room with a glow, and task lighting should be positioned (usually between the top of the head and the work surface) to enable working or reading.

Accent lights should be used to highlight artwork and decorative objects. (A decorative light like a chandelier is a fourth, not necessarily essential, component of lighting design; it should never be the sole source of light in a room because it throws everything else into darkness.)

But some rooms call for creative solutions that go well beyond the basics. Particularly in deep winter, when days are at their shortest, homes that do not get lots of natural light (and darker rooms even in those that do) can benefit from clever lighting design.

In the examples listed above, seven designers have come up with an array of tricks, from a glowing interior landscape with walls of backlit onyx, to a scheme that mimics the grand lighting of Radio City Music Hall.

Even the smaller-scale solutions, like artificial skylights and lighting built into furniture, offer new ways of thinking about the traditional trio of ambient, task and accent lighting.

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