

Terms of Enlightenment



HAVE YOU EVER BEEN IN A space that feels like someone just shut you into a tanning bed? Or perhaps like you're on an operating table being prepped for surgery? I'm not sure who started the trend of loading ceilings with high hats (those pervasive recessed can lights that show up everywhere and seem to be spreading like gremlins in a typhoon), but I blame that person for the hassle of not only having to rip them out of almost every renovation project I've ever encountered, but also for having to ask clients to spend their money to do just that. I could have put it to much better use: buying a fantastically beautiful painting, for example, or really anything else that brings joy and holds value. This contagion of glaring overhead lighting sadly offers neither.

Whatever happened to soft, glowing lamps and pools of attractive light filling rooms?

I once de-renovated a charming old Victorian house that had been entirely molested at some point in the 1990s. It killed me to have to put back what we knew from old photographs had been ripped out: perfect old kitchen and

House Rules

BY

Markham Roberts

pantry cabinets, pretty tiled bathrooms with giant tubs and washstands, and lovely old-fashioned lights with real character (all of which were the kind you have to spend a

lot of effort and money to replace). We must have taken out at least a few dozen recessed lights in the living room ceiling alone. No wonder the previous owners moved under all that glare.

Good lighting is so important. Aside from erasing a multitude of sins, it makes us feel calmer (less like we're in the dentist's chair) and look nicer (just ask Blanche DuBois). And when properly controlled—by systems that don't need technical degrees to operate—it gives us the ability to brighten a room when needed.

I am not completely against the idea of recessed lighting—in fact, I use it on almost every project—but I use it sparingly and judiciously. Kitchens, bathrooms, dressing rooms, and laundry rooms, for instance, all benefit from some extra-bright light. But I don't think we need 20 ceiling lights in the TV or dining room.

With respect to how they look in the select spaces where I do use them, I will point out I'm a bit of a snob. I prefer the subtle ones, which are plastered into ceilings, rather than the giant, metal-trimmed ones from times gone by (not

RIGHT: In the designer's living room, table lamps, wall-wash lighting, and pierced-porcelain candle lanterns bathe the custom green walls (inspired by "a beautiful Cerignola olive") in an inviting evening glow.



fast enough) that look like the rotisserie chicken heat lamps I'm always going off on rants about.

And should we talk about lightbulbs as well? And how I miss the lovely warm light of incandescent bulbs? The first LED bulb I ever tried was so intensely bright and bluish, I swear I could feel the light burning through me. (Look, I know it was much better for energy conservation, and maybe it would have killed the Covid virus, but it wasn't attractive—the cold blue tones of that bulb just made everything look sallow.)

Thankfully, technology is responding to my aversion to cold fluorescent lighting, and warmer lightbulbs are a thing. Though I do wish someone would make clear bulbs that don't have the orange cheese stick filaments, but I suppose I am getting somewhat used to them—or at least trying to convince myself I am. One positive is you don't risk burning your hand unscrewing it when it is on—how many burns have I sustained on project installs over the years, getting the right bulbs into each lamp or bedside reading light?

I'm also easily frustrated by light switches I can't figure out (more mutterings from the old Muppet in the balcony). Why do people have to complicate things? Being a dinosaur when it comes to lighting, I just want a system that would work for Barney's gang. I am continually offered by AV professionals what seem like very complex (and despite assertions to the contrary, difficult-to-control) lighting systems. My immediate response is to ask them to treat me like an octogenarian and to just give me light switches with toggle dimmers. I promise I won't need to control the lighting from my phone in the car. Honestly, were I to go on vacation and

forget to turn everything off in the house, I probably have bigger problems and would be better served by a handsome young nurse/minder than a lighting system. My minder could be an excellent masseur too, but I digress.

I want simplicity in life, especially as I get older. I don't want 17 different lighting settings to choose from, nor do I want to try to control my mood by what a lighting designer thinks is cool or sexy or "chill."

That is decidedly unsexy, as is someone my age confused by different keypads and remotes, utterly befuddled by how to use them.

I propose we recognize our limits and respect them. Technology seems to evolve

faster than I can keep up, and for those who relish it, it must be exciting. But I will rest easy with my perfectly simple toggle dimmer light switches, at peace in the knowledge that I'm not going to be outsmarted by a smart home system. And who knows, maybe I can become the new spokesperson for Fisher-Price lighting systems. ♦

♦
Whatever happened to *soft, glowing lamps* and *pools of attractive light* filling rooms?

MARKHAM ROBERTS is a New York-based designer, author, and recipient of the Institute of Classical Architecture & Art's prestigious Arthur Ross Award for Interior Design. Find more of his musings on decorating at veranda.com/houserules.



Markham's ILLUMINATING DOS & DON'TS

- **Use frosted bulbs behind lampshades.** This will diffuse light evenly and won't create shadows of the harp or the shade's wire framing.
- **Choose a clear bulb when it will be visible.** Best for chandeliers without shades and lanterns where the bulb is seen through the glass.
- **No plastic or fake-wax-dripping candle covers.** Ever, unless you're decorating for Norma Desmond.
- **Control wattage by using double Edison cluster sockets in lamps.** For end tables, I use two 60-watt bulbs; for bedside lamps, I use one 60-watt and one 100-watt so the light can be amped up for reading.
- **Be open to change when it is right.** I hated the idea of battery-powered candles until my 85-year-old mother showed me that she programs the ones on her outdoor entry table to turn on every evening at dusk and flicker until bedtime. If she can do it, I can—and frankly, unless you put your face over the hurricanes, you don't notice the light isn't a real candle flame.