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Margaret Maile Petty

In Fear of Shadows: Light Conditioning the Postwar American Home and Lifestyle

In the early 1930s, the author and cultural critic Tanizaki Jun'ichirō described the importance of shadows in traditional Japanese aesthetics, interiors and daily rituals in the slim volume *In Praise of Shadows*.¹ He wrote, “The quality that we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty’s ends”.² Disturbed by the ease with which this cherished condition could be instantly erased, stripped away with the flick of a switch, Tanizaki decried the influence of Western science and technology on Japanese culture. In particular he was concerned with the rapid spread of electric light and the ready acceptance of this blessing of “scientific civilization”. Calling attention to the disparity in cultural readings of darkness, Tanizaki suggested that Westerners lacked a fundamental knowledge of and respect for shadows, citing a basic “failure to comprehend the mystery of shadows”.³

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If one differentiates the monolithic ‘Westerner’ accused of shadow illiteracy and examines attitudes about electric light in the United States in the first half of the 20th century, Tanizaki’s account is not far off. In this period American electricity providers, lighting manufacturers, and illuminating engineers orchestrated a number of comprehensive efforts focused on dramatically increasing the consumption of electric light among residential consumers. Employing themes that united darkness with anxiety and depression, dimness with the outmoded and inefficient, the electric utility and lighting industry associated electric illumination with the well maintained home and familial harmony. This paper explores the ways in which such messages were crafted and disseminated among the American public and investigates the political, economic, and cultural contexts of the colonizing of the American domestic environment by the electric lighting industry. This study argues that such promotional strategies contributed significantly to sustained beliefs about appropriate residential lighting levels and practices in the US.

Better Light, Brighter Light: Sight to Lifestyle

As the World War II came to an end, American industry shifted its focus from war production to the development and expansion of the consumer goods market.⁴ Fueled by the financial incentives of Veterans Administration benefits and the Federal Housing Administration's support of the mortgage market, new home construction skyrocketed after the war. Within two decades of the war's end approximately 60 percent of Americans owned their own homes, as compared with only 44 percent in 1940.⁵ In such an environment, the home and the homemaker became key agents in the prosperity cycle, with industry and marketers alike focused on the potential of the domestic environment as a primary source and site of consumer activity.

150 Electric lighting engaged this market by appealing to individual seeing conditions, domestic labor requirements, and the appearance of the home and its inhabitants. While in the early 1930s, the lighting industry launched the "Better Light – Better Sight" marketing campaign, which promised improved sight for daily tasks and increased worker efficiency with higher light levels, by the latter 1940s emphasis shifted towards lifestyle benefits.⁶ Increasing competition for market share among the dominant companies necessitated this dramatic repositioning of electric light. As General Electric's president, Charles E. Wilson candidly described in 1947 for "The Wall Street Journal": "We're not kidding ourselves. The fight for business in the period ahead will be more rugged than anything we've been in up to now".⁷ He further suggested that the company's production of consumer lighting products would be greatly expanded in order to "bring into balance for the first time G.E.'s consumer and industrial business".

In the hopes of gaining advantage in the booming postwar consumer goods market, companies like Westinghouse, Sylvania, and G.E. aggressively promoted abundant electric lighting as an essential condition of modern living. Armed with a new approach especially tailored to the postwar consumer, leading electrical manufacturers, professional lighting industry groups, utility providers, real estate developers, and retailers together commenced upon a direct and purposeful campaign to expand the domestic market for electric lighting. G.E. might as well have been speaking on the behalf of the entire industry when they claimed, "We are no longer just selling light bulbs; we are selling luminous environment".⁸

Light Conditioning: A House Where the Sun Never Sets

Entering the postwar market, G.E. led its promotional efforts with the Light Conditioning program. Officially announced to industry in the November 1950 issue of "The Magazine of Light", this "great crusade" aimed to "light condition" 40,000,000 America houses – the approximate number of homes then wired for electricity.⁹ Wildly ambitious, the Light Conditioning program was carried out with the cooperation of "virtually the entire electrical industry", and represented "by far the biggest, most far-reaching and most important residence lighting project in the history of the Lamp Department".¹⁰

_ General electric advertisement, frontispiece, "The Magazine of Light", General Lamp Department, General Electric, 19, 1950, n. 4, Nov.



The cover of this special issue of "The Magazine of Light" captured the spirit of the campaign and the proposed lifestyle benefits of Light Conditioning for the postwar consumer [ill. 1]. A young blonde woman, her married status indicated by the slim gold band on her left hand, stares with delight at a handful of recipe cards. The excitement of her blue eyes is transposed to the artful array of electric light bulbs forming a graphic pattern behind her. The recipe cards describe: dining, make up, reading in bed, writing, sewing, ironing, and television viewing. With simple universally applicable guidelines, G.E.'s Light Conditioning recipes aimed to facilitate better lighting, thereby making

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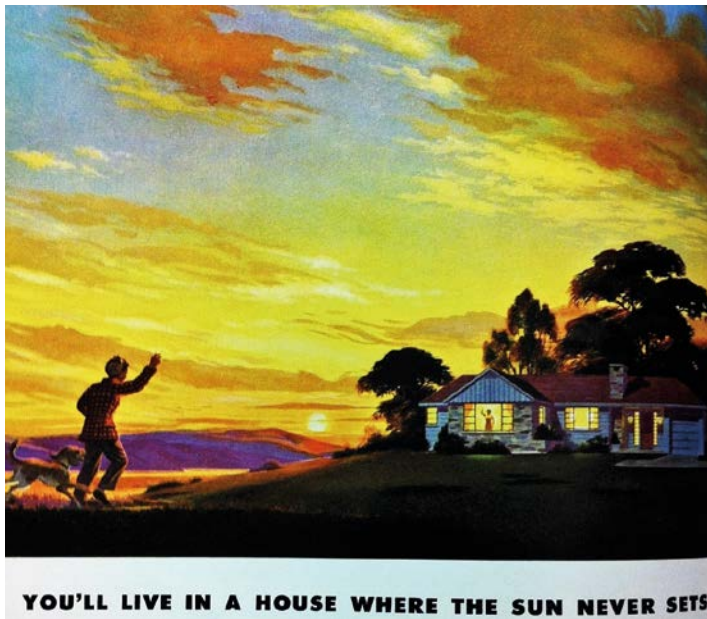
all such household activities more efficient and more enjoyable.

Inside the magazine a full-page color advertisement for Light Conditioning entitled "You'll live in a house where the sun never sets" greeted readers. [ill. 2] The image above echoed this notion. A sunset, richly colored in gold, orange and twilight purple on the distant hills tells a classic American story. A young boy running towards home with his dog raises his arm to wave to a woman – his mother, one imagines – standing in the central picture window of a ranch house peacefully settled into the landscape. The house is luminous, radiating warmth and suggesting the security and harmony of a domestic idyll.

Promising a "home where no dark shadows lurk. Where gloom is unknown", G.E. argued that modern electric lighting offered both control and protection, providing for a home environment "Where darkness never comes – except by invitation". Where "the sun never sets – to shrink your horizons, to dim your eye, to weight your soul". G.E. was not only offering better residential seeing conditions, but also an eradication of doubt, depression and anxiety. Light Conditioning then was more than just a strategy for residential illumination; it was promoted as a means with which to control the visual, aesthetic and psychological conditions of the domestic environment.

See Your Home in a New Light

In order to facilitate sales and best assist homeowners in the selection of residential lighting applications, G.E. produced "See Your Home in a New Light", a small booklet cataloguing a host of Light Conditioning recipes, which left no room unconditioned, systematically addressing "all the important places which need to be lighted in any home" with activity specific recipes.¹¹ [ill. 3] The program aimed to empower DIY residential lighting by providing information to middle-class homeowners on how to specify lighting for their own homes with relative ease. Based upon



_ General electric advertisement, frontispiece, "The Magazine of Light", General Lamp Department, General Electric, 19, 1950, n. 4, Nov.

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research conducted by E.W. Commery, head of the Residential Lighting Section of General Electric's Engineering Division at Nela Park, the uniform recipes were intended not only to serve as a basis for "skilled specialists" but also for "the hundreds of thousands of homes which the skilled specialist can never meet or serve".¹²

Light Conditioning Postwar Planned Communities

Looking to harness the popularity of model houses as sales tools for large middle class housing developments, G.E. also targeted builders and developers to help sell the Light Conditioning message to new homebuyers. Setting an impressive goal, G.E. called for 10,000 light-conditioned demonstration homes to be built across the country by the end of 1951. According to the company's research, this represented one demonstration home for every 4000 newly installed residential electric meters.¹³

With targeted marketing outreach initiatives, such as G.E.'s 1952 education program for Long Island builders, it is clear that the company understood well the power of numbers. A detailed account of the Long Island campaign published in "The Magazine of Light", described G.E.'s strategic infiltration of the region's flourishing residential construction market.¹⁴ Focused on converting builders to the "Light Conditioning story", G.E. proposed that their lighting strategies could provide a critical marketplace point of difference attractive to buyers.

Collaborating with Central Queens Electric Supply, a Long Island electrical equipment provider, G.E. invited nineteen of the company's best residential construction clients to fly to Nela Park for a one-day education and training semi-

nar – an extravagant and apparently persuasive measure. After arriving at G.E.’s research campus, the participants were given a series of Light Conditioning and “visual planning” demonstrations organized by E.W. Commery. According to accounts reproduced in the article, the program was received very positively. Morris Weinberger, a partner in the Long Island housing development Seaford Oaks, wrote the seminar organizers to thank them for the experience, describing how it had changed his approach to his business. Enthusiastically he wrote: “I am not trying to sell houses today; I am selling lighting, and the response from the home buying public is sensational”.¹⁵

Offering evidence of how the Light Conditioning message was further disseminated throughout the building trade, the article included testimonials from architects and decorators working with the builders who had been to Nela Park. Long Island Decorator Peggy MacIntyre reported that “Light conditioning seems to help everybody. In bringing out the colors and textures of fabric and furniture, it is an aid to the decorator, and a sales help to the speculative builder; but most of all, it makes the home a more pleasant place for the family who lives in it”.¹⁶ MacIntyre’s comments are indicative of much of the industry’s marketing rhetoric in the second half of the decade. In the latter 1950s lighting was frequently linked to positive emotional responses, such as happiness – both personal and familial. As one of the new owners of a Long Island Light Conditioned house remarked, the lighting made “the whole house more cheerful ... putting an end to gloomy days”.¹⁷

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Light for Living and the Electrified Postwar Lifestyle


Despite such unfettered enthusiasm for the Light Conditioning program at the outset of the 1950s, by mid-decade G.E. was rebranding its campaign under the new slogan, “Light for Living”. With expanded emphasis on lifestyle benefits rather than improved visual acuity, the Light for Living campaign exemplified the industry’s continuing efforts to drive up demand for electric lighting within the residential market. Developed in tandem with Live Better Electrically, both campaigns were consolidated under the far-reaching Medallion Home program in 1958, supported by 180 electrical manufacturers and 300 utility companies across the country.¹⁸ Again appealing to builders as the means through which to access consumers, the Medallion Home program awarded houses meeting specified standards of “electrical excellence” a special medallion “to be affixed permanently” to the home’s facade. To obtain a “Gold Medallion” required “full house power”, which included all major electrical appliances, electrical heating, and adherence to Light for Living recommendations (which essentially were the same ‘recipes’ introduced with Light Conditioning). The program incentivized the inclusion of more electrical appliances, services and lighting by promising a significant market advantage for houses displaying a Medallion. Unlike previous marketing programs that assumed home buyers would recognize the “value added” by lighting, the Medallion Home program made it explicit and easily recognizable by embodying electrical excellence in a physical trademark.¹⁹ [ill. 4]

Newspapers across the country featured stories on the Medallion Home pro-

MAKE-UP


It takes two to make-up. The two lamps in this recipe aid you in applying make-up smoothly and discreetly. They give you light evenly distributed to both sides of the face (at face height)—undistorted by color from the shade.

STANDING AT DRESSER



lighting recipe 16

SEATED AT DRESSING TABLE



lighting recipe 17


WHAT TO USE

Pair of lamps with white or ivory translucent shades.
A type preferred, or **B**.
BULBS: 30/100w 3-Way, or 100w Soft-White (top of bulb at least 2" below shade top).
SHADE: top 7", depth 7", bottom 9", (larger preferred).
LAMP HEIGHT: Dresser Recipe 16; shade center 22" above 36" high dresser. Dressing Table Recipe 17; shade center 15" above 30" table.

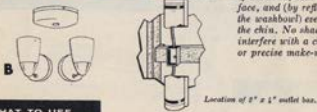
WHERE TO PLACE
 Position 6" out from wall; 36" between shade centers.
DOUBLE DRESSER OR DRESSING TABLE—Select larger lamps of the **A** type. **SHADES:** min. 12" bottom dia. **BULBS:** 50/150w 3-Way.
POSITION: up to 48" between shade centers.
WIDE MIRROR AND COUNTER—Extend a shielded DeLuxe Warm White fluorescent unit over counter. Surface mount or recess in a double row of tubes to fill space. Center 16" out from wall.
 Or on wall unit with single or double row of tubes.
DESIRABLE PLUS—Add vertical fluorescent brackets each end of mirror.

lighting recipe 18

SHAVING OR MAKE-UP AT BATHROOM MIRROR



This three-fixture recipe gives the right lighting for grooming, and at the same time will light the average-sized bathroom. There is ample light on top of the head, both sides of the face, and (by reflection from the washbowl) eyes under the chin. No shadows will interfere with a clean shave or precise make-up.



WHAT TO USE

SET OF THREE FIXTURES
A, Fluorescent: DeLuxe Warm White tubes, shielding preferable (illustrated).
 Ceiling: two 18"-15w tubes, or one 32w circline.
 Wall: one 24"-20w tube on each side.
TRIGGER STARTING BALLASTS available in 15w and 20w fixtures; also circlines.
OR—B, Incandescent: always shielded by opal or ceramic-enamelled glassware.
 Ceiling and Wall, **MINIMUM:** one 60w each unit; min. 6" dia. shielding on wall; 8" on ceiling. **PREFERABLE:** two-socket unit, 40w each socket. Min. length 10" or longer. Four-socket type, 25w each.

WHERE TO PLACE
 Ceiling: centered with wash bowl, above front edge. (12"-18" from wall)
 Wall: centered 60" above floor, 30" apart.
SWITCHING: the three units should be controlled by one wall switch.

ALSO ESSENTIAL
For Separate Compartment: wall or ceiling unit, 75w bulb, shielded.
For Shavers: vapor-proof ceiling unit; 60w, switch on outside.

AND TO MAKE LIFE EVEN MORE PLEASANT
Pedestal Light: swivel unit under front of counter. R-30, 75w bulb.
Night-Lite: plastic unit with 7C7 bulb; or electroluminescent.
IES Suspend and Infrared Heat Lamp: timers available.

Lighting recipes, General Electric Company, Lamp Division, See Your Home in a New Light. Tested Light-conditioning Recipes that Create Light for Living, 4th edition, The Company, Cleveland OH 1955, pp. 32-33.

gram, many giving particular attention to the lifestyle improvements afforded by extensive electrification and illumination.²⁰ One such article, *The Right Light? This Home's Got 35 of 'em!* appearing in the "Chicago Daily Tribune" offered a comprehensive report on the number and type of lighting applications featured in a Gold Medallion home exhibited at the Chicago World Flower and Garden Show in the spring of 1959.²¹ Planned by residential lighting experts from Commonwealth Edison, the General Electric Company and the Chicago Lighting Institute, nearly triple the standard number of lighting fixtures for a single family home were incorporated in the model Medallion home.²²

Describing the psychological benefits of such comprehensive residential lighting schemes, Ted Cox, managing director of the American Home Lighting Institute, claimed that good lighting in the home would elicit positive emotional responses from household members and guests. Following Institute standards, Cox argued, would create luminous environments that "Radiate beauty and hospitality", guard "against nervousness and fatigue" and provide "emotional stimulation" by raising or lowering light levels.²³

By approaching the postwar residential market in this way, the industry grew demand by generating desire for the lifestyle advantages afforded through increased electric lighting and by provoking fear of negative impacts on the home and emotional state of its inhabitants if the industry's residential lighting recommendations were not adopted. While General Electric took a significant leadership role in postwar efforts to increase the consumption of electric light in American households, their campaigns were supported across the industry, including such professional bodies as the Illuminating Engineering Society (IES). With far reaching control of the lighting industry and considerable influence within the residential construction

GOLD MEDALLION HOME!

The Hallmark of Electrical Excellence

- ★ ELECTRIC HEATING
- ★ ELECTRICAL APPLIANCES
- ★ LIGHT FOR LIVING
- ★ FULL HOUSEPOWER

The advertisement includes a line drawing of a single-story house with a chimney, a large crowd of people in mid-20th-century attire, and a large circular medallion. The medallion features a house silhouette, a family of four, and the text 'GOLD MEDALLION HOME!' and 'LIVE BETTER ELECTRICALLY'.

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—Advertisement, *Gold Medallion Home!*, "The Hartford Courant", September 20, 1959, p. 9F.

industry, G.E. and its partners were able to keep significant pressure on residential consumers to add more and brighter electric illumination to their homes throughout the 1950s and 60s.²⁴

Conclusion

Between 1945 and 1975, consumption of electric power doubled every ten years reaching levels eight times what they were at the end of World War II by 1975, and five-fold increases in illumination levels similarly were registered between 1948 and 1963.²⁵ Such remarkable increases would not have been possible without G.E.'s consistent and relentless development of the residential market. As they and the wider electrical industry had hoped at the outset of the postwar period, by the close of the 1950s they had successfully sold electric lighting as a vital element in the efficient daily management of the household and as a key mechanism for ensuring the emotional and physical well-being of family and friends. Cornice lighting, fluorescent lamps hidden behind valences, task lighting tailored to the demands of each activity or chore, lighting mounted in shelves and above cupboards, anywhere and everywhere bright electric illumination kept shadows at bay in American postwar homes.

As Tanizaki mused prophetically in the 1930s, "So benumbed are we nowadays by electric lights that we have become utterly insensitive to the evils of excessive illumination".²⁶ Certainly this was the case in the United States until the magnitude of the energy crises of the 1970s drove up utility rates to such an extent that Americans had to rethink their energy consumption practices. Even then (as before) the solution was to push for more efficient lighting rather than lower lighting levels.

Instead of seeking the mystery and beauty of shadows, the American public had been so indoctrinated with the rhetoric uniting electric lighting with a higher standard of living that the notion of lowering light levels was not seriously considered. The majority of Americans in the mid 20th century would never think to ask, as Tanizaki had, if it might be possible to “push back into the shadows the things that come forward too clearly” and to “turn off the electric lights and see what it is like without them”.²⁷

- 1 J. Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, Random House, New York 2001 (1933).
- 2 *Ibidem*, p. 18.
- 3 *Ibidem*, p. 18.
- 4 L. Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic. The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, Vintage Books, New York 2003, pp. 111-192.
- 5 *Ibidem*, pp. 122-123.
- 6 C. Winslow, 'Better Light, Better Sight', is New Slogan, "Chicago Daily Tribune", Sept. 29, 1935, p. C5; *Eyesight Aids for Building More Popular. Painting and Decorating Stressed as Important to Lighting*, "The Washington Post", Sept. 8, 1935, p. R11. See also C. Goldstein, *From Service to Sales. Home Economics in Light and Power, 1920-1940*, "Technology and Culture", 38, 1997, n. 1, pp. 121-152.
- 7 J. Guilfoyle, *General Electric Co., Is Six Industries in One; Makes 200,000 Products*, "The Wall Street Journal", April 14, 1947, p. 1.
- 8 D. Loehwing, *Spreading Light. The Electrical Industry Finds Rewards in Vanquishing Darkness*, "Barron's National Business and Financial Weekly", 36, 1956, n. 24, Jun. 11, p. 3.
- 9 H. H. Green, *This is it!*, "The Magazine of Light", General Lamp Department, General Electric, 19, 1950, n. 4, Nov., p. 8.
- 10 "The Magazine of Light", General Lamp Department, General Electric, 19, 1950, n. 4, Nov., pp. 3, 7.
- 11 General Electric Company, Lamp Division, *See Your Home in a New Light. Tested Light-conditioning Recipes that Create Light for Living*, 4th edition, The Company, Cleveland OH 1955.
- 12 E. W. Commerly, *The Story Behind General Electric's New Concept in Home Lighting*, "The Magazine of Light", General Lamp Department, General Electric, 19, 1950, n. 4, Nov., pp. 9-11.
- 13 *Ibidem*.
- 14 *Look to Long Island*, "The Magazine of Light", General Lamp Department, General Electric, 21, 1952, n. 2, May, pp.10-22.
- 15 *Ibidem*, p. 19.
- 16 *Ibidem*, p. 17.
- 17 *Ibidem*, p. 18.
- 18 *Country-wide Support Given to New Program*, "Los Angeles Times", Jun. 1, 1958, p. F7; see also R. Hirsch, *Technology and Transformation in the American Electric Utility Industry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 2003, pp. 51-60.
- 19 *Ibidem*.
- 20 See: *These Recipes are Different*, "The Washington Post", Sept. 8, 1956, p. H29; *Homes on Display Top 1958 Lighting Standards*, "The Hartford Courant", Sept. 21, 1958, p. 10C; *The Right Light? This Home's Got 35 of 'em!*, "Chicago Daily Tribune", Mar. 21, 1959, p. W_A2.
- 21 *The Right Light?*, see footnote 20.
- 22 The national standard in 1958 was 12.2 lights per residence. *Ibidem*.
- 23 *Ibidem*.
- 24 *Ibidem*.
- 25 L. Schmidt, S. Marratto, *The End of Ethics in a Technological Society*, McGill-Queen's Press, Montreal 2008, p. 43; D. Loehwing, *New Age of Light? Dazzling Innovations Hold Bright Promise for the Illumination Industry*, "Barron's National Business and Financial Weekly", Dec. 6, 1963, p. 3.
- 26 J. Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, see footnote 1, p. 36.
- 27 *Ibidem*, p. 42.