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The Persistence of the Open Flame: Work and Waste in the Healthy, Modern Home

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Abstract

We still maintain open flames in our homes despite the development of cleaner, cheaper, and more efficient devices that can provide the same heat or light, often with greater comfort and control. My attention was drawn to this condition by Wolfgang Schivelbush's thoughtful book on the industrialization of light in the nineteenth century, which recounted the rejection of gas and then electric lighting in the living rooms of bourgeois and upper-class houses in Europe. A similar condition exists in America and, for example, we still light candles when we sit down to particular kinds of meals, whether those are ritual meals like thanksgiving and the Passover Seder, or intimate occasions, or even expensive restaurants.

Comments

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THE PERSISTENCE OF THE OPEN FLAME: WORK AND WASTE IN THE HEALTHY, MODERN HOME

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I would like to examine the nature of that persistence, to ask what is at issue in the continued use of open flames in modern households, particularly as the conventional tales of technological accomplishment tell us that those devices should have disappeared. I will read that condition through the discussion of candles in design guides from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, but first I would like to ask a number of broad questions that trace my own effort to understand this phenomena.

Nostalgia. Initially I viewed this persistence as largely nostalgic, as part of the broad collection of conservative practices that seek to preserve or resurrect pre-industrial conditions of living. In current architectural discourse that is primarily characterized by the practices of historic preservation, though that discipline has consolidated a host of activities that can be traced back to projects like the restoration of Williamsburg in the 1930s or the gothic revival of the mid-nineteenth century.

Can the candle or open fire reclaim those earlier, simpler times and how does it effect that transformation?

Resistance. The success of historic preservation, however, draws much of its energy from the critique or despair about the unintended consequences of industrialization, the pace of life, its homogenization and standardization. In that context it is possible to see the use of candles and open flames as a form of resistance to industrialization, which raises the question posed by Henri Lefebvre, do simple acts of everyday life constitute a sufficiently autonomous form of resistance, of the kind imagined by Michel de Certeau, or do they have to form part of some larger political resistance.²

Does the use of a candle have sufficient power to counter such forces, to transform everyday life, or are they merely converted into temporary items of status?

Comfort and Work. A great deal of research has been done on household technology in recent years, showing the range of cultural topics that are manifest in even the simplest household arrangement. The progressive refinement of tool and devices are typically understood according to the pursuit of comfort and the release from work. Devices like the automatic heater, the electric stove, and the electric light promise to replace the work of servants with the work of machines. Not only have recent critiques shown the ironies and paradoxes of that process, but work itself cannot be examined without a equivalent analysis of leisure.³

What do people do with the time that has been made free and how does that candle operate in that context?

Health. The question of whether candles and open fires operate strictly according to status and nostalgia or as a greater form of resistance generally revolves around the discussion of beauty, of aesthetics in the home, but it also constantly raises the issue of health. Health is an apparently objectified index of comfort, happiness, or relief from suffering, but what was explained earlier in this century as a matter of disease germs now appears to us a more complex, ecological matter immunity and stress, it is a thoroughly historical and cultural entity.⁴ In a way, health operates as a final measure of happiness.

Clarence Cook, 1878: It was a great deprivation when we were obliged to give up candles for illuminating. nothing could be prettier than the effect of a room prepared for an evening party, decorated with flowers and lighted with wax candles. Candle-light is the only artificial light by which beauty shows all its beauty--it even makes the plain less plain.⁵

Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, 1897: The proper light [of the drawing room] is that of wax candles. Nothing has done more to vulgarize interior decoration than the general use of gas and of electricity in the living rooms of modern houses. Electric light especially, with its harsh white glare, which no expedients have as yet overcome, has taken from our drawing-rooms all air of privacy and distinction.⁶

In spite of the fancied advancement in refinement and luxury of living, the development of the modern heating apparatus seems likely, especially in America, to do away with the open fire. . . No house can be properly aired in winter without the draughts produced by open fires. Fortunately, doctors are beginning to call attention to this neglected detail of sanitation; and as dry artificial heat is the main source of throat and lung diseases, it is to be hoped that the growing taste for open-air life and out-door sports will bring about a desire for better ventilation, and a dislike for air-tight stoves, gas-fires and steam-heat.

Elsie de Wolfe, 1913: When all is said and done, we must come back to wax candles for the most beautiful light of all. Electricity is the most efficient, but candle light is the most satisfying. For a drawing-room, or any formal room where clear light is not required, wax candles are perfect. There are still a few houses left where candlesticks are things of use and are not banished to the shelves as curiosities. Certainly the clear, white light of electricity seems heaven-sent when one is dressing or working, but for between-hours, for the brief periods of rest, the only thing that rivals the comfort of candlelight is the glow of an open fire.⁷

G.K. Chesterton, 1914. A queer fancy seems to be current that a fire exists to warm people. It exists to warm people, to light their darkness, to raise their spirits, to toast their muffins, to air their rooms, to cook their chestnuts, to tell stories to their children, to make checkered shadows on their walls, to boil their hurried kettles, and to be the red heart of a man's house and hearth, for which, as the great heathens said, a man should die for.

Ruby Ross Goodnow, 1914: But I have seen so many false mantels, and filled-in fireplaces and hearthless houses lately that I am alarmed at the trend of it all. I appreciate the high cost of living and the formidable cost of coal and wood, but we can always find a way to enjoy the things we very much desire. The very poor have no hearths, perhaps, but they can make the kitchen stove a substitute, and find in it something our expensive 'false mantels' can not give; something to gather around. No one ever had a desire to pull his chair up to a false mantel or a radiator.

How did we ever dare eliminate the hearth from our homes, I wonder? I dare say the day will come when some one will invent a system of illumination that will make sunshine unfashionable, and a system of ventilation that will result in windowless houses, to those who lose all the spirit of home-making.

Paul Frankl, 1928: [The electric bulb] is much more flexible than any other modern contrivance, for, without materially increasing its volume, a bulb can be adjusted to give almost any range of lighting force from the low light of one candle-power to the glare of several hundred candle-power. . .

Before leaving this subject, a word must be said for the old-fashioned candle. In many ways this form of light, with its sympathetic glow, has never been rivaled. It is extremely limited and has many disadvantages but it does something no other form of light can do—it lends festivity to the home and gives a mystic air to the altar. The soft flickering light caused by candles is always a sympathetic one. It will be a long time before the mellow light of candles at a dinner table is completely banished from the home.⁸

Emily Post, 1930: If you build the type of drawing room that looks best with candle-light, then have candles by all means. But whether you are likely to use side-wall outlets or all the base-plugs you put in or not, do not omit plenty of electric wiring in a steel and concrete apartment building. It is much better to stop up the prepared outlets than to find out later, when your walls are finished and your room furnished, that you must either chisel the walls down or sit in darkness, or burn two or three dozen candles nightly that have to be replaced with fresh candles every morning. . . . It is convenient, therefore, to use candles for occasions—or use occasional candles; but for the essential lighting, have plenty of outlets available, should you need them.⁹

George Nelson and Henry Wright, 1945.: The only light needed for eating is light on the table. Background illumination has only to be sufficiently bright to reduce excessive contrast between the table and its surroundings. But light for the table is not merely illumination: let us remember that the one place in the modern home where the candle still has any functional justification is on the dinner table, where the

flickering light and warm color do an excellent job of glamorizing the food, the tableware, and the diners.¹⁰

Certainly through these quotations we hear the progressive refinement of electric lighting, but we also hear the hope that the candle or the open flame somehow provide a better life. I don't believe it is possible to simply reestablish the lost wholeness of life implied by Goodnow, for example (nor that it necessarily ever existed), but that to the degree that the candle at the dinner table or the open fire is understood to operate according to promises of better health, it offers to reunite ethics and aesthetics.

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