

THE CANDLE AT THE TABLE: WORK, WASTE, AND LEISURE IN THE MODERN HOME

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We still light candles when we sit down to particular kinds of meals, whether those are ritual meals like thanksgiving, or intimate occasions, or even at expensive restaurants. The candle is an outmoded technological device. Its continued use offers a remnant of previous habits and a kind of resistance to the conditions of modern life.

The proximate cause of this paper was a seminar I taught last year on the mechanization of the household. While preparing for that class, I was struck by a tale told by Wolfgang Schivelbush in his thoughtful book on the industrialization of light in the nineteenth century. He recounted the frequent rejection of gas and then electric lighting in the living rooms of bourgeois and upper-class houses in Europe and I wondered if the same conditions held true in America. They did.

As an introduction to this investigation of candles, I would like to begin with the kind of question offered so frequently today, in this case posed by

Neil Denari: “In a world where the currency of the new/now is often valued more than that of tradition, stability, and legibility, what can Architecture, perhaps the heaviest of all disciplines, do to contend with the fluid currencies of money, politics, aesthetics, technoscience, speed, and above all, the world imagebank which saturates our short-term memory?”¹

The twentieth century has a long tradition of answering that kind of question with investigations of the quotidian and the everyday. Nietzsche suggested that the task of considering moral matters demands a consideration of everything that shapes existence. He wondered, for example, whether “anyone made a study of different ways of dividing up the day or of the consequences of a regular schedule of work, festivals, and the rest? What is known of the moral effects of different foods? Is there any philosophy of nutrition?”² He titled these questions *Something for the Industrious*, and may have been thinking about the full implications of the project of historians such as Jakob Burkhardt who worked to place the Renaissance in its broadest social, economic, and cultural context, or Giovanni Morelli, the Italian physician who re-attributed master works on the basis of the painting of inconsequential, but characteristic features like ear-lobes and fingernails. That same attention to neglected features certainly underlies the initial insights of Freud’s analysis, while the massive task of examining the trivial and negligible data of whole cultures was taken up by the school of Annales,³ by Siegfried Giedion,⁴ Henri Lefebvre,⁵ Ivan Illich,⁶ and Michel de Certeau⁷ to name only a few of those most immediately relevant to architectural discourse.

When such analyses focus their attention on the objects of everyday life, as opposed to its events or economic data, they must contend with theories of tools and technology that are largely subordinated to its measures of efficiency and waste, and concepts of systems and flows. Those examinations are equally bound up with the romantic nostalgia for items and practices lost in the march of progress that have informed both the attempts to preserve buildings and artifacts and to recreate their look and feel. As such, the simple questions I would like to raise about the continued use of the candles at the dining room table stand somewhere in the contentious field between and among the very popular and successful practices of interior design, historic preservation, and environmentalism, all which can be understood in one sense as critiques of contemporary technological living.

Methodologically, these questions are posed using the words of the numerous authors of home design books and articles from the mid-nineteenth century, to the mid-twentieth. Most of these books follow a room-by-room format, inherently light on statements of principle, conveying their position by description and example. They are nonetheless argumentative and polemical in the extreme, whichever side of the whichever stylistic debate they come down on. On the issue of candles in the dining room there is nearly uniform agreement; from the introduction of gas lighting through the progressive refinement of electric lighting, virtually every author who discusses light in the home makes some exception for those candles.

In order to illustrate the degree to which this is independent of style let me quote Paul Frankl, one of the early advocates of modernism in American, and Emily Post, whose book *The Personality of the House*, sought to preserve traditional grace and style.

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. . . (to analysis and design based on perception)

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.”

Emily Post, 1930: If you are building, it is essential that you study the electric outlets carefully. Live in each room in imagination and be sure that every light and electric appliance has been arranged for. 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. Emily Post, 1930

Resistance: health, imperfect devices,

Through their eyes we see the imperfect advances, the problems produced by gas fumes, and the immediate nostalgia for the earlier, simpler technology, which incidentally had itself been much improved with the new cleaner waxes and self-trimming wicks. . . .

In the most general terms, historical accounts of the modern house report the progressive elimination of work as the household evolved from a site of production to one of consumption. Promise of Technology:

- Saving labor,
- Saving time,
- Saving resources,
- Preserving health,
- and as part of consumer culture offer new symbols of social position

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. I do not know why it was that when gas came into use it was thought necessary to make all the chandeliers and branches clumsy and mechanical. Perhaps there was an unconscious connection in the manufacturer’s minds between these instruments of illumination and the ponderous machinery and manipulation by which the gas is produced. . . .

There is no doubt that we Americans are unreasonably in love with machinery and contrivance, and that the makers of gas-fixtures have played upon our love of ingenuity until they have made us accept

the most monstrous and complicated gas-machines for the decoration of our rooms. I live in the blessed hope that gas will one day be superseded by something better. It is unhealthy, it is troublesome, it is expensive, it tarnishes our silver, our picture-frames and our wall-papers, and how can it do this without injuring those who breathe it?

Oscar Wilde, 1882: Lamps and wax candles are still better as they give a softer light, are best to read by, do not destroy any other decoration, and are very much prettier and healthier than gas.”

Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, 1897: The lighting of the company drawing room—to borrow its French designation—should be evenly diffused, without separate centers of illumination needful in a family living-room. The proper light 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.”

H. R. Hawkes, 1889: “Until the electric light is more manageable than it now is, there are but two ways of lighting rooms—gas or lamps and candles. Gas is the cheapest and the least trouble, but it is the most destructive to furniture and pictures, the least healthy, and the least becoming. Lamps are the next best, if they can be induced not to smell; wax candles are the best of all, if they can be warranted not to bow.”

Work

The critique was not incidental, and very much aware of the broader historical currents. Calls for the recovery of the other site of open flame were often more explicit:

Ruby Ross Goodnow, 1914 : “Certainly none of us wishes to revive the primitive customs of our ancestors. We are vastly better off materially; we understand hygiene and sanitation and many other things our forebears had no time to contemplate. We read by well-shaded lights and save our eyes. We buy our cloth ready spun and woven, and have no regret for spinning-wheel days. We are done with the drudgery of the crane and its ungainly posts, and we no longer require the services of the warming pan—we treasure it for decorative purposes. and we have not material need of the old time hearth.

But—there is another side to the picture. Are the fairy stories in gaily covered bindings as wonderful as were those we heard from our mother’s lips when we were children? Do the illustrations compare with the marvelous pictures we saw in the flames?

"We have story-tellings and songs and beautiful times before the fire. . . . ‘I could sing for joy at the development of their imaginations, for they tell me amazing stories of things they see in the flames. Can you imagine a child telling his mother a story out of his own insides, as Billy says, before a radiator? I tell you there is nothing that can take the place of a Hearth."

Gilbert Murtaugh, 1924 :“Modern requirements have made it necessary to eliminate to a great extent anything that causes extra labour that may be saved. It is for this reason that while lighted candles are the most decorative of dining-table illuminants they must be dispensed with in the home of the man of moderate means.”

Ruth Schwartz Cowan has explored the ironies of that development, demonstrating that women of the late twentieth century actually engage in “more work” than their predecessors despite such labor-saving tools as the vacuum cleaner, microwave, and automobile.

In contrast to direct critiques of devices or their failure, there are other stories that glorify the candle for its own sake, and it is these tales that warrant the closest inspection. The modern household contains

numerous sites and occasions where the inefficient and laborious are specifically cultivated in the pursuit of other virtues such as leisure, luxury, and as part of the nostalgia for pre-industrial conditions by which the American dream home is defined.

In theories of work, productive activities that have a determined end are opposed to activities which do not. The opposite condition is called leisure, but it is not to be confused with the rest or inaction that merely serves as a preparation for more work. Leisure has its own ends, and it demands expenditures that can even exceed those of productive work: the energy and competitiveness displayed in purposeless activities may only be rivaled by the endless construction, decoration, refinement, and maintenance of the home.

Time/Phenomenology

The changes allowed people to reflect about light in ways not previously imagined. . .

In 1851, on the occasion of the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace, Gottfried Semper appreciated the possibilities of the new gas lighting at that same time that he scorned the disguising of gas pipes to resemble candles or oil lamps. With the rapid proliferation of the new sources throughout the modern city—in the streets, factories, and public buildings if not proper homes—it does not seem accidental that his subsequent depiction of the festive origin of his principle of *bekleidung* or dressing would be illuminated by a less advanced source of light

Semper, 1860: “I think that dressing and the mask are as old as human civilization, and the joy in both is identical with the joy in those things that drove men to be sculptors, painter, architects, poets, musicians, dramatists, in short, artists. Every artistic creation, every artistic pleasure presupposes a certain carnival spirit, or to express myself in a modern way—the haze of carnival candles is the true atmosphere of art.”⁸

This account of the candle seeks to examine both the phenomenal aspects of that candle haze and that “carnival spirit,” not to understand candles per se, but as an means of achieving time for leisure in modern life. It is not a question of time away from work, but of a time not defined by work, or by the clock. It is a possibility often accorded to art or to aesthetics, a hope barely diminished today and legible in the advocates of the candle from whichever period:

Clarence Cook, 1878: But, in reality, though nothing that may be devised for lighting our rooms can ever be so pretty to look at as candles, yet gas also has its poetry, and, as its use is established, we are bound to think how it may be used gracefully.

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.”

Harold Donaldson Eberlein, 1919 : “The illuminants to be considered upon grounds of decorative desirability or expedience are candles, oil, gas, and electricity. Of these, the first most completely fill all the ideals of quality just mentioned. There is no light so restful and agreeable in quality to the eye as candle light and no light is kindlier to the appearance of a room. The radiance is mild and diffused, shadows are not cut sharp and exaggerated, and the colours in furniture an decoration are not outraged.”

George Nelson, 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.

Ethics and aesthetics

I do not want this to be misunderstood as a critique of modern methods of lighting, far from it; electric lighting has in many cases achieved the subtlety and grace sought by these many writers. The problem lies more deeply and brings us back to the question posed by Neil Denari, How can architecture contend with the roiling, fluid ethic of work? surely not with aesthetics alone, but neither without them. Attention to such quotidian acts of resistance does not suggest that the dictates of work and commodification, of life lived according to the progressive and linear time of the clock, can be arrested merely by engaging in practices like the lighting of a candle at the dinner table. It does suggest that the possibility of architecture, of building and living well in modern society, can only occur in situations that disrupt those dictates, where aesthetics and ethics are not so carefully separated.

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⁸ “I think that dressing and the mask are as old as human civilization, and the joy in both is identical with the joy in those things that drove men to be sculptors, painter, architects, poets, musicians, dramatists, in short, artists. Every artistic creation, every artistic pleasure presupposes a certain carnival spirit, or to express myself in a modern way—the haze of carnival candles is the true atmosphere of art.” Gottfried Semper (1860), 257.