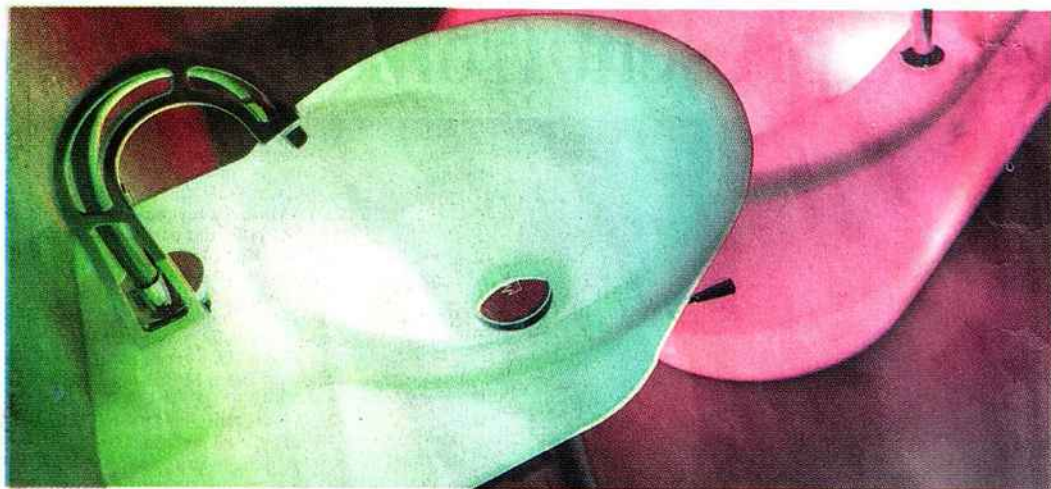


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Fashion



A bathtub and washbasin fitted with a light-emitting diode, or LED, by Jan Puylaert for WET, his Italian design company.

New ways to illuminate the home

By Ernest Beck

Alexander Lervik, a Swede, knows about the gloom of long dark winters. So, as a designer striving to bring light to dim spaces, he has come up with illuminated versions of products that never glowed before: a door handle fitted with a light-emitting diode, or LED, that shines bright red when the door is locked, and an illuminated children's swing.

For Lervik, light "changes the identity of a product and gives you more to work with, more expression."

He is not alone in his fascination with light. Designers and manufacturers in many countries are now using miniaturized LED technology to wire everything from kitchen and bathroom fixtures to furniture and floor tile. Light is emerging as the medium of the moment.

The German home products company Villeroy & Boch sells Light Tiles — ordinary-looking glazed clay tiles equipped with an LED device. Hit a wall switch and the tiles, which cost \$75 to \$100 each and come with a 60-page installation manual, glow blue, white or amber.

At a time when high-tech gadgets fill every corner of the house, "people are receptive to light applications that go beyond ceiling lamps and sconces," said Rick Crane, tile sales manager for Villeroy & Boch.

Mixing the elements of light and water is popular with many companies exploring this new field, but the combination comes at a price. Neve Rubinetterie, a small Italian faucet maker based outside Milan, has come up with a product called the Brick Glas.

It is a faucet embedded in a rectangular block of transparent or frosted Plexiglas, which is lighted from below by a low-voltage LED.

The faucet costs about \$1,500, which may be a bit steep for the opportunity to brush your teeth in the dark. But it is not as expensive as showering with light.

Ondine, a luxury shower systems company in City of Industry, California, sells the Electric Light shower head, with 270 spray channels wired with fiber optic cables and a halogen light, for \$2,500 (for the chrome version) to \$15,000 (24-carat gold). The color of the light is adjustable.

"If you like blue because it's more soothing, you can set the head to that," said Patty Gatto, marketing director at Ondine. The shower head was designed as a form of chromatherapy, which assigns healing properties to each color of the light spectrum and which has become a popular marketing tool for light product makers.

Designers are jumping on the chromatherapy bandwagon, whether or not they are true believers. Jan Puylaert, a Dutch designer who runs an Italian design company called WET, says he's not really a New Age type, but he believes that light gives you "a nice energy and some invisible comfort, like plants." Puylaert's contributions to such comforts are a bathtub and a wash basin, made of lightweight polyethylene, which come with either a halogen light or an LED, and sell for between \$1,400 and \$2,500 for the tub, and \$250 and \$500 for the basin.

Torsten Neeland, a German designer based in London, says light is about "stimulating the senses," even when its source is something as mundane as a

coffee table. During London design week events in September, he showed such a table, the Oranienburg (\$2,350) with three elliptical Corian tops that can swivel out from a pedestal base. A fluorescent light on the base casts a pink glow between the layers. The effect, Neeland said, "reflects the power of color."

These new forms of illumination are popular with consumers, manufacturers say, but some purists in the design world are less impressed.

Brooke Hodge, the curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, says in many of these cases, adding an element like light is "an odd embellishment" because it doesn't have a function.

"Light is a pleasant thing and you can use it to change the mood and atmosphere, like those watches with different colored faces," she said. "But you have to ask, 'What does it do? Why is it there?'"

The push to illuminate everything isn't all frivolous, according to Lervik. He got the idea for the Brighthandle door handle, which sells in the United States for about \$150, while gazing at a "Do not disturb" sign in a hotel. "I thought, it might be possible to design the function of that sign into the door, to use light to communicate the same thing," Lervik explained.

It may simply be the beauty of light that is attracting so many designers to it. After all, said Leni Schwendinger, a lighting artist in New York City who is working on a project to illuminate the Coney Island parachute jump, people love light because "it fills the eye with brightness and delights."

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By J.J. Martin

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