

Let there be mood lighting

South Koreans are discovering a taste for Instagrammable interiors

A move away from fluorescent tubelights is softening the ambience



May 8th 2021

SEOUL



WALKING AROUND Seoul at night, Suzie Son noticed a curious change. The city's high-rise residential blocks usually emit a harsh white glare from the fluorescent lights fitted in every South Korean flat. But in recent years she has seen an increasing number of soft yellow rectangles appearing in the grids of windows. "My foreign friends always complained about the cold bright light in their homes," says Ms Son, who runs the lighting division at IKEA Korea and

goes on night-time walks as part of her market research. “None of the Koreans ever thought about changing them.”

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That is no longer the case, especially among younger Koreans. “I have those bright ceiling lights in my place but I never turn them on,” says Kim Yeon-soo, a 24-year-old paralegal who recently moved into a small flat in Seoul. Instead, she uses lamps with low-wattage yellow lights to create what she considers a more calming atmosphere. Her new bed was chosen for the soft, indirect reading light built into the headboard. Her friends have similar tastes, she says: “Young people just pay more attention to light and mood.”

Their parents are not far behind. Ms Kim says her mother shares her distaste for white lights. A shopkeeper in Euljiro, Seoul’s lighting district, says his most popular product—single-bulb pendant lamps inspired by mid-century European designs—is sought by 20-somethings and middle-aged housewives alike.

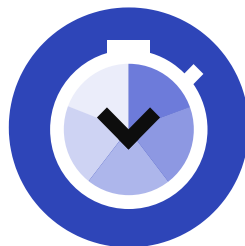
Countless pictures of impossibly sumptuous interiors, shared on social media, have helped home decor join handbags and cars as a way of displaying status, reckons Minsuk Cho, an architect in Seoul. “People used to pay little attention to their homes in that respect,” he says. Most South Koreans work long hours and socialise outside the home. “But now there’s Instagram and YouTube, so even if you’re rarely there your home is something else you can put on display to compete with others.”

The pandemic has had an effect as well. Like their counterparts elsewhere, South Koreans have spent more money on their homes the longer they have been stuck in them. Sales in Ms Son’s division rose by 20% over the past year, she says. Department stores run by Lotte, a local conglomerate, report a similar increase in demand for lights. Monthly sales of designer lamps at the Conran Shop, a pricey British retailer, have grown five-fold since it opened in Seoul’s glitzy Gangnam district two years ago. Gentice, a purveyor of bedroom furniture,

is expanding its range of bedside tables because people want somewhere to put their reading lights”, says a saleswoman at an interior-design fair at a mall in Gangnam.

Soft yellow lights are casting their glow outside the home, too. Though most Korean restaurants and pubs remain in thrall to white striplights and multicoloured LEDs, the self-consciously hip coffee shops, wine bars and noodle joints popping up across the country are aiming for a more sophisticated vibe. Their owners scour traditional markets and the internet for vintage Tiffany lamps and knock-off versions of Bauhaus light fixtures, importing design trends beloved by cool kids across the globe. For long-suffering aesthetes such as Mr Cho, that is some light relief.

This article appeared in the Asia section of the print edition under the headline "Let there be mood lighting"

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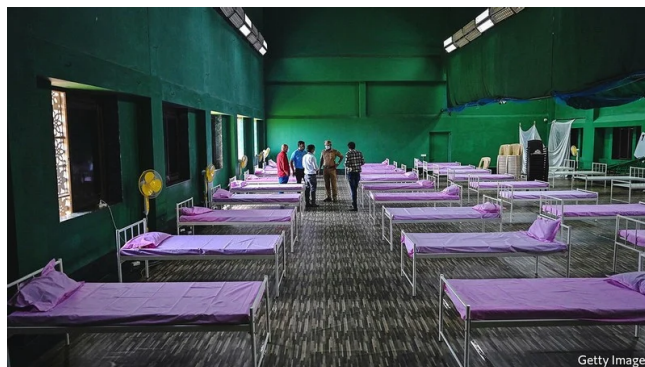


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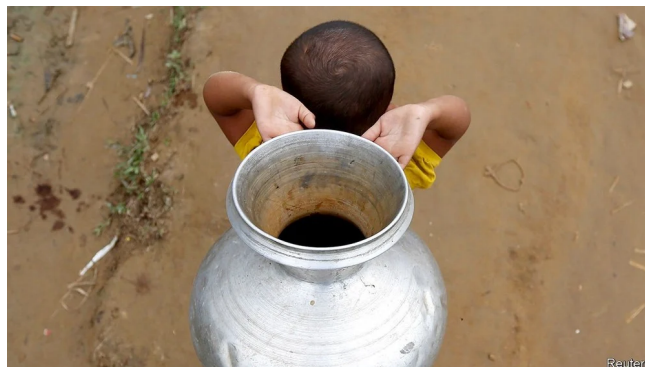
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