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Publication date:
2013

Document version
Tidlig version også kaldet pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):
Breunig, M. Lighting the Modern Home: An illumination of Function and Intimacy in Poul Henningsen's Lamp Design.

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Lighting the Modern Home: An Illumination of Function and Intimacy in Poul Henningsen’s Lamp Design

By Malene Breunig

Within architecture and design, the standard-bearers of modernism in Denmark saw their efforts to modernize as part of a project to enlighten and to reform. In keeping with the forms of production and requirements of function, they aimed to bring about a socially homogenous culture. Therefore they began to work on changing the attitudes of designers, producers, and consumers, who were not inclined to change their norms and habits in order to understand and thereby take in ‘the modern’. In many places in Europe, from about 1920 to 1960, modernism was the subject of massive efforts to convey its meaning and significance, efforts preserved in various genres of writing that offer unique insight into the intentions behind the formal vocabulary of modernism.

In Denmark around 1930, a professionalized body of literature developed offering guidance to improved quality housing access for the working- and middle classes. The purpose of which was to make the consumer demand housing, furniture and objects for everyday use that had a rational form and were industrially manufactured. In articles and books a long line of architects, cultural critics and product designers gave lessons in an demonstrated purposeful consumer behaviour. The aim was to integrate not only the physical and material arrangement of the home and its furniture with modernism, but in addition—in a psychosocial perspective—to maintain the home as a counterweight to the steadily hectic and incoherent character of the public realm.

These guides to better housing became platform for quite emotional discussions. At issue was how shaping the material framework of the home was to be related to its primary function as ‘cradle’ of the modern family. The fronts were between those who wanted to preserve representative historical style markers, and those who wanted to take on the conventions of ‘comfort’ and ‘cosiness,’ to counteract any sentimental and emotional superfluousness in the appearance of the objects.
In this manner the guides to better housing became a forum in which to debate the advantages or disadvantages of modernism and its idea that a physical and aesthetic process of purification would result in a type of spiritual home cleansing. The discussion turned on the fuzzy concept of domestic well-being, ’cosiness’, on how to create harmonious coexistence between people and their surroundings; it represented a decisive element if the home were to function as recreational haven. There was, however, considerable disagreement about how an atmosphere of domestic ‘cosiness’ was to be embodied in concrete terms. The ’traditionalistists’ expressed the majority’s taste and conventional aversions towards the architects’ idealist and paternalist prescription for consumer freedom through the formal regulations of modernism. The simplification and abstraction of modernism robbed the (petit-) bourgeois interiors of its representative attributes that since the end of the 19th century had served as protective ’home front against the alienating elements of modernity. But it was precisely by rebelling against this kind of estrangement from reality that the modernists in their turn argued that the home should be cleared of all fanciful and distinguishing symbolic values as a condition for the free unfolding of the individual and for the development of democratic ways of life.

![Fig. 1 Carl Jensen: 'An Architect passed through the Living Room', Blækspruten 1943](image-url)
Poul Henningsen (PH) was one of those who from the 1920s and on until the 1960s continually debated the connection between modern product design, housing questions and interior room planning. In addition to debating his work in relation to the function and aesthetics of electrical lighting, he aired his views on the social and cultural aspects of product design. Views that PH thought were embodied in his three-shades lamp designed to cover the blinding effect of the lightbulb and developed prior to the World Exhibition in Paris in 1925. Thanks to his talent for marketing, it both achieved a degree of commercial impact and came to be accepted as one of the sacrosanct icons of Danish functionalism. This success story was not only the result of the lamp, but the fact that PH, as editor of the journal *Critical Revue* (1926-1928), elaborated on his views in connection to related and divergent positions current at the time. In particular in the article 'Tradition and Modernism', published in *Critical Revue*, 1927, PH confronted and polarized some contemporary style tendencies that he claimed to oppose. In his understanding, his standpoint not only rose above the academic recovery of a classic design idiom but also above the formal eclecticism of historicism. He also placed himself at a distance to the expressionist decadence of European Art Nouveau as well as to the commercial styling strategies originating in the United States. More surprising was PH’s critique of avant-garde modernism, for instance Bauhaus architects, whose Apollonian formal abstractions, according to PH, were an expression of the aestheticization of the production techniques and resource materials.

![Sequence of lamps from 'Tradition and Modernism' with PH's commentents](image)

Fig. 2 Sequence of lamps from 'Tradition and Modernism' with PH’s commentents

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1 My translation of the Danish title *Kritisk Revy*. 
In opposition to 'traditionism' (i.e. traditionalism) and 'modernism' would characterize the professional guidance literature to better housing in Denmark, the dominant standpoint of which PH named 'realism'. According to PH, realism must begin its materialization in the rational goal-directed analysis of function, preparatory to solve a given assignment. On such a basis, formal expression would disown arbitrary fashion fads and representative style trends. That is why he introduced a principled distinction between 'free art' and 'applied art'. Thus he laid the grounds for a methodically well-disciplined definition of the tasks and framework of product design. It was exactly these measures that 'functionalism' gained ground among young Scandinavian architects and product designers during the 1930s and 1940s, and recognition among cultural critics and public authorities.

However, it turns out that what was apparently a logically grounded claim: form follows function – contained considerable scope for interpretation. Therefore neither rational working processes nor rational forms of expression were necessarily the result. In what follows the lamp designed by PH will serve as illustration thereof. First, I show how the Danish writer Tage Skou Hansen, in his novel The Jar and the Stone² (1987) quite unambiguously uses the conceptual apparatus and arguments of PH to rationalize a critique of functionalism long after its manifestation. Then I present PH’s own intentions that were the basis for the design of the lamp, and look at them in relation to the armature of the lamp. Its qualitative properties are compared to those of two contemporary armatures. On that background, it is argued that PH’s lasting involvement with home lighting was a sign of a pragmatic attitude, including both function and intimacy, to the design ideals of modernism.

II

In Tage Skou-Hansen’s novel, The Jar and the Stone, the male protagonist, the architect Ejnar, says the following about the work on his prefabricated housing project that is about to begin:

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² My translation of the Danish title Krukken og Stenen.
You had to face the times. Industrialization was the reality. Architecture has to accept that, or it would be impossible to control. And if you analyzed that reality without illusions, without any irrelevant personal bonds, then it would return unambiguous answers. If you knew the conditions of the assignment, and the needs that must be fulfilled, the solution was invariably to be found at the point of that intersection. In fact, it dictated itself. And if the conditions were met, personal growth would be fertile too. Because naturally given needs would no longer exclude each other in the long run.

As would be expected, an ambitious building project could cause a reaction for a time, if people didn’t know their possibilities or didn’t understand how to use them because of prejudice and old-fashioned family patterns. But was there anything else to do after the dismal thirties, the world war and the atom bomb, than trust people’s common sense and longing for harmony? Make a space for their fundamental functions without regard for rank, status, and assume they could manage on their own when the framework was made right. He thought it was an objective program. [...] 

Unfortunately the building industry was underdeveloped and the housing associations too small for the tasks ahead. A contemporary architecture of light and air and green belts could only be realized by standardization and serial building as in the countries outside Denmark. Therefore cooperation with big industry and municipal and national authorities. Aesthetic compromises might be necessary in the light of social considerations. Architecture wasn’t one of the liberal arts, such as painting and music were. For that reason it ought to be an applied art, a tool. And wasn’t perhaps nameless work just as valuable as original work that conferred aura and fame? What counted was changing the practical conditions a bit and use functionalism as the idiom of democracy. Honest beauty carried no class stamp and was aimed at the general public. Otherwise it would never be modern. Ejnar modelled himself after certain culture radical architects of the Critical Revue circle.³

The novel’s post-war vision of modern architecture is founded on social indignation and rational analysis of the functional relations and the free expression of human needs. It is not new. More than twenty years has passed since PH created and presented his vision that modern design projects must rest on a strategy of objective problem solving. He did this in 'Tradition and Modernism,' for example. This essay in particular seems to be the source of Tage Skou-Hansen, who anachronistically makes it a programmatic manifesto to his fictional character. Ejnar joins the banners of cultural radicalism and appropriates without hesitation the rhetoric of 'the struggle in applied art (...) for a new form' after 'the social problem and technology had been revolutionized'.⁴

⁴ Henningsen (1927): 30, ll. 25-29. Quotations here and onwards are from the article as reprinted in Bay and Jensen (2008).
PH’s combat-ready terminology functions as an ideological bulwark that Ejnar can entrench himself behind in order to subdue an inner irresolution rather than serving a candid course of action for free human development. The alternative PH presented to existing design practices is not entirely clear to his young party soldier. Even though PH’s critiques of design in the 1920s and 1930s to a high degree had become the new consensus among post-war architects, Ejnar has apparently misunderstood a considerable analytical principle. The true significance of PH’s appeal for a ‘realistic’ problem-solving strategy is missed.

Ejnar’s ideal architect is not representative of the pioneering generation of Danish or Scandinavian functionalists whose efforts, like those of PH, were primarily aimed at relieving the material consequences of the social imbalances of the interwar years, not least the shortage of housing. Instead his admiration is directed towards Le Corbusier, whose idealist formalism Ejnar aspires to in a major building and facilities project, which he hopes will call forth social recognition as well as self respect. In this way Ejnar is blind to PH’s pronounced scepticism of Corbusier’s radical purging of not only the symbolic forms of representation of historical styles, among other things, but of the vocabulary of traditional forms. And it is this blindness that in effect amounts to a repression that makes him the anti-hero of the novel. By putting himself without conflict at the service of some of the fundamental tendencies of post-war growth societies, such as efficiency and paternalism, Ejnar loses over the course of the novel that professional self-assurance or cocksureness that the ideology should guarantee, and disillusion runs him aground. So although he acknowledges the value of unstructured and spontaneous impulses of the human mind in theory, he doesn’t appreciate them in practice. His marriage too slips out of his hands. Even though he has been deprived of his utopia, Ejnar remains a functionalist because this is all he can manage, and because with rising market values and the budding welfare society, it is advantageous to be one.

According to the plot structure of the novel it is an irony of history that Ejnar’s personal defeat takes place at the same time that functionalism is victorious as the dominant ideology of the Danish welfare society. Mirrored in Ejnar’s personal fate, functionalism has won the day to rack and ruin. And it does that, the novel says, because its honest endeavour to create social homogeneity and its acceptance of the inevitability of modernity
fails to appreciate a vital element. This recognition belongs to Ejnar’s colleague, who is the author’s mouthpiece and who contests what he thinks is the one-dimensional outlook of humans in functionalism, namely its authoritative conception of architecture and its predictable results:

[...] You pretended that planning was a purely objective matter. A neutral, value-free concern. You pretended you knew man’s true needs and in a way so you did. As a biological being man was exceedingly constant. He needed light and air and green belts, practical kitchens and hygienic bathrooms. But what about his irrational needs? Those you disregarded. As if they were wholly inappropriate. In short, you pretended that sensual, desiring and carnal man was a rational being only.

Society should adapt itself to man, was the word. But was it really anything but a platitude that everybody could agree about? Nobody knew man. You could have certain presumptions, certain assumptions. But if you wanted to anticipate and harmonize every form of human expression on the drawing board, you locked up the future.5

III

The views conveyed in Tage Skou-Hansen’s covert direct speech are identical with those of the Danish historian of literature and ideas, Johan Fjord Jensen, in his collection of essays, *Homo Manipulatus* (1966), whose critique of functionalism established a new consensus. Both leave an impression that functionalism by definition was devoid of sensitivity to human’s contradictory being and irrational inclinations. On their reading, it is in this manner possible to reject functionalism *en bloc* as both inflexible and inhibitory. This was exactly what many product designers, architects, and critics sought to confirm during the 1970s and 1980s by pointing at a number of horrifying examples in which the adaptation of functionalism to industrial methods of production under the auspices of an expanding welfare society had degenerated into jerry-building and deadly monotony. With the economic demand for accessibility to the lower classes of society and standardization and anonymity as ideals of production and design, functionalism itself had come to represent a hegemonic and disempowering conformity – a sort of negative inheritance that had to be discontinued.

In this showdown with a hard-line, but probably inflexible functionalist tradition, Tage Skou-Hansen and Johan Fjord Jensen among others came to make a narrow existen-

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tial accusation. Not only was it based on a rationalized interpretation of the intentions and
results of functionalism after the event, one that did not make any allowances for the dif-
ferent points of view that existed among functionalist designers and disseminators. But
looking back at some of the basic texts and designs of Danish functionalism, a considera-
bly more varied impression is attained than posterity was aware of. In particular the
prominent work by PH identifies what the objectives of applied art are. And especially
his development and 'branding’ of the legendary three shade lamp armature represents in
crucial ways an alternative, indeed a corrective, in his view, to the international modernist
avant-garde.

The fact that the PH-lamp achieved iconic status as the incarnation of modern Danish
product design already after its first appearance in 1925 was not because PH had merely
appropriated the ideological imperatives of international modernism and the aesthetic
conventions that went with them. And certainly it was not the formalist ones that emanat-
ed from the Bauhaus School (1919-1933) and the circle of artists, architects, designers
and critics associated with journals like L’Esprit Nouveau (1920-1925) and De Stijl
(1917-1931), among others. Here industrial modes of production and materials were
praised in a sort of fetishistic worship of 'the new’ and its potential for progress and
emancipation. PH followed what he called a reality principle. He did not imagine that
modern urban industrial culture could, or should, be manifested in symbolic forms of rep-
resentation through extensive use of mechanical serial mass production, reinforced con-
crete, plate glass and steel (on the other hand, he seems to do just that in his work within
the genres of the non-applied arts, for instance in his Film of Denmark6, 1935.) Here he
envisaged no automatic deliverance of democratic social conditions and emancipated be-
haviour patterns. The conquests of technical science PH saw as practical means only that
by appropriate application might help bring about more 'equality’, 'harmony’ and 'au-
thenticity’ between people and their physical environment.

Determining what is 'appropriate’ is of course no less idealistic, because PH defined
that as synonymous with realism. But it is nevertheless worthwhile to hold on to his
markedly critical objections, made already in the 1920s, to avant-garde modernism that
sought to transform architecture and product design into an exact science based on the

6 My translation of the Danish title Danmarksfilmen.
assumption that the ideal human was a rational being. In several contexts PH points out that a rational paradigm like that had already resulted in determinative relationships between form and function, between the human body and consciousness on the one hand and the physical object world on the other that were far from logical and objective. It is true that he seldom addresses such criticism directly, but it is quite clear that he was no adherent of what he called the “the World Movement ’New Form’”. The way Mies van der Rohe and others represented international modernism as strict geometric buildings with concrete surfaces, steel constructions and glass sections as visually dominating style elements, signified to PH primarily wasteful extravagance and monumentality. In the same way the Bauhaus School had conventionalized the processing of materials and design development into a ‘constructivist’ style that according to PH stigmatized modernism as a new form of utopian aestheticism. These critical objections clearly appear from PH’s pedagogically illustrative commercial for his then new lamp in *Critical Revue*, No. 3, 1926.

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7 Henningsen (1927): 31, 1. 52-53.
It is therefore puzzling that despite PH’s markedly early position-taking on the issue several prominent design historians and PH-connoisseurs have omitted to distinguish between the considerations and reasons that were behind that lamp’s formal design and oth-
er lighting armatures of the interwar period. The distinctive qualities of PH’s lamp are not thrown into relief by comparing it with different or related armatures, not even the Danish tribute book *Lights!* (1994) that otherwise gives a thorough account of PH’s extensive studies of lighting engineering and of the shaping of the armature as motivated by a more ‘extensive’ concept of functionality. Perhaps it is due to the authors’ wish to canonize PH as a world-class modernist, one who broke with the prevailing Danish artisan tradition. And, additionally, the wish may have to stress PH’s work as at once many-sided and consistent. One consequence is, however, that the book appropriates PH’s own idea of modernism and ‘story-telling’ that accompanied the lamps until his death in 1967, an appropriation that is somewhat lacking in critical reflection.

It has to be said that an overly sympathetic reading strategy has generally prevailed in scholarship relating to PH’s enormous body of work. However, when dealing with PH’s writings, there is every reason to take into account that we have to do with a writer who did not act as a theorist, but as a critic and practical designer. That does not make his project any less ambitious, but does entail that his work should not be judged according to scientific academic norms of conceptual and descriptive adequacy or consistent argumentation. PH preferred to commit himself on an *ad hoc* basis, and on this principle he might often be guilty of self-contradiction, inconsequentiality and hybrid position declarations. Much indicates that it was exactly this practice that came to characterize the genesis and history of the PH lamp. Fundamentally his lamp system seems to build on several types of reasoning which have their basis in observations of light rather than in ideal demands that ‘the modern’ be objectified. Compared to ‘pure’ modernism and its ideal typology of modern man and his environment, the PH lamp conveys a certain ambiguity and asynchrony, even though it stands as a fully realized project.

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8 In Dybdahl (2006): 203, for example, it is merely stated that, “the 1920s PH lamp was a manifestation of the new objectivity of the international functionalist avant-garde”.

9 My translation of the title of Danish monograph *Tænd*.

10 A presentation of modernism in architecture and design in terms of ideal types is found in Greenhalgh (ed.) (1990): 1-24, for example. Here the modernist project is summarized by means of twelve conventionalized main criteria in which common international characteristics are emphasized, while national features and other forms of differentiation recede into the background. Greenhalgh himself has certain reservations, for instance,
Before looking at the formal characteristics of the lamp, it is important to look at PH’s underlying reasoning. Because it is not so remarkable that PH was considered a representative of the international avant-garde of the 1920s and that his lamp was considered a Danish version of the armature designs at the Bauhaus School, for example. In the countless articles and letters-to-the-editor, PH sort of stage his lamp system and expanded his product range, often posing as a fundamentalistic denier of tradition, one whose preferred rhetorical device was a confrontational pro et contra. As such, either one was for a progressive line that emphasized enlightenment and reconciliation with the conditions and possibilities of modernity—and therefore supported the PH lamp. Or, one turned a blind eye to the unavoidable, and clung to a traditionalism that made believe it carried on the ‘good old values’. And if so, one could choose freely among the other lamps offered by the market!

The purpose of this reductive contrast must be studied in the light of the concrete contexts that produced these articles and in which they were read. Primarily PH addressed, either directly or indirectly, certain contemporary influential and conservative design institutions, in particular the school of architecture and furniture design at the Danish Royal Academy of Fine Arts, where its director since 1924, Kaare Klint, had established craft-based methods of work, systematized proportioning and obligatory studies of historic furniture. The polemical tendency came from PH’s contempt of petit-bourgeois and philistine tastes that to him represented ignorant and calcified ways of life.

about the reductive ‘levelling’ of individual achievements – a likely analytic consequence produced by this generalizing prism.

Nevertheless, it is exactly typological periodization, if perhaps cruder than Greenhalgh’s, that have resulted in simplified interpretations of the potential significance of the PH-lamp, making it merely a somewhat pallid version of the international modernist avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s. Such historicization risks—if not by push, then by shove—to become a history that puts on a parade of square furniture and cups, a march of hemispherical lamp shades without regard to quality; a race about who came first, with the passing of each year timing the winners with no concern for individual performances, on that united spiritual path, the Spirit of the Times,” as the Danish PH scholar, Allan de Waal has emphasized, in de Waal (1978):19.
But also in his presentations of presumably 'objective' premises of lighting problematics, PH could leave the impression that he was the guarantor without compromise of a modern design, which defied tradition. He expressed this 'matter-of-fact anti-conformism' in the lamp maker, Louis Poulsen’s house magazine *LP & Co. News* (1941-), in which, as editor, he explained the various spectral curves, coefficients of utilization, economy and hygiene of the incandescent lamp; wrote about pupil measurings and his own studies of the shade effects and perceptual properties of lighting.\(^{11}\) Everything presented in detail, even though he must have been aware that documenting these laboratory experiments would hardly interest readers to the same degree. The sober presentation could however generate a sense of trustworthiness among colleagues, distributors and potential consumers. Here was finally a scientist of sorts who in order to serve higher a higher cause had managed to raise his design practice above commercial interests, aesthetic routine thinking and passing fads!

The seductive lustre of indisputable fact that pervades the technical and physiological reports thus gave PH the chance to produce 'the evidence' of the history of the lamp and, at the same time, arrange the interpretive matrix for its reception. These apparently reliable data allowed him to launch deeply personal appraisals of lighting problematics and yet appear neutral, according to his own mind, in the marketing of the PH lamp as an essential part of the standard equipment of a modern home. Nevertheless, the nature of his arguments and their significance in regulating mental hygiene and guide to housing rarely became the object of critical analysis, and thereby had no influence on the reception of the PH-lamp.

PH’s preoccupation with the physical as well as the psycho-social arrangements of domestic interiors is not completely different from the modernist discourse of early 20th century avantguardism in architecture and product design. The main figures here are Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Gerrit Rietveld and Mart Stam, who did keep the home as focus point of the development of modern design. This is evident in, for instance, Corbusier’s *Vers une architecture* (1923) that expresses the goal of 'the architecture of the new spirit' and points to a fundamental veneration of the home and collaboration between economic, technical and aesthetic interests as the enabling condition of 'the new'. Thus

\(^{11}\) Some of these articles have been reprinted in Voltelen et al. (1974).
Corbusier speaks about 'the coalition: one between architects and men of taste, and the universal love of the home.' But although modernists like Corbusier, as did PH, argued for mass production of houses, thereby seeing the house as an industrial product rather than a piece of 'work', PH’s views, and the physical-aesthetic materializations of them, are based on an absolute opposition between two design ideologies, viz. between what was presented as retro traditionalism and progressive modernism. The former, it was claimed, rested on an outmoded, bourgeois-romantic concept of a piece of (manual) 'work'. Scandalously, an ideology that was promoted by well-esteemed institutions of contemporary art, design and exhibition, and by a majority of consumers. The latter presumably represented an intellectually abstract and anti-nostalgic design strategy. A few years before PH made his conceptual distinction between free and applied art, other places in Europe saw the institutionalization of an antithetical relation between design originating in, and directed towards, the conventions of an ideal bourgeois home and modernist design that quite differently, without illusions, wanted to conceive the home as the ratification of modernity.

This valorizing opposition had as an unfortunate consequence, which far into the 20th century, became the prism through which functionalism and early modernism were seen. The American art and design historian Christopher Reed has observed that ‘the home has been positioned as the antipode to high art. Ultimately, the eyes of the avant-garde, being undomestic came to serve as a guarantee of being art. [...] This has been the standard of modern art: a heroic odyssey on the high seas of consciousness, with no time to spare for the mundane details of home life and housekeeping.’ A similar, equally polemical observation is already to be found in the verbal volley PH, in the third number of Critical Revue, fired at the so-called 'neue Sachlichkeit' that the designers of the Deutsche Werkbund and the Bauhaus School invoked (fig. 4). This criticism was occasioned by the Werkbund’s travelling exhibition that also visited The Museum of Industrial Art in Copenhagen, and gave PH an opportunity to sharpen his profiling of ‘reality testing modern

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12 Translated by Frederick Etchells, p. 246.
problems and ideas that we try to introduce’, in contrast to a modernism that ’has made objectivity an ornament’.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{14} Henningsen (1928): 6.
Seen in relation to the radical version of modernist design and its ideologically founded opposition between two ideal homes: a bourgeois-traditional one against a modernistic one, then PH’s lamp system could arguably be said to represent an endeavour to mediate. It seems based on a deliberation about the house as a residence of moderation and solidarity, a sphere of harmony, stability and connectedness. But it is, at the same time, a result of the cost-effective product differentiating production capability and material resources of industrial society. Or, put in another way, the PH-lamp demonstrates that the everyday and non-representative uses are prioritized, and thereby it breaks the traditional view that the design process is an act of artistic creation. However, that does not make the lamp break with tradition, let alone defy custom and usage associated with home as the site of harmonious living for family and couples. On the contrary, PH’s wish to valorize common interest in the object world of everyday culture must be seen as his ambition to reintroduce, on modern terms, selective elements of a bygone era that esteemed the life world of private and everyday life.

A closer inspection of the armature of the PH-lamp and its characteristic lighting properties it produces, or, rather, is produced by, reveals that PH, initially, must have found problematic the avantgardist overemphasis on artefacts as primarily historical assertions. The experiments with developing an incandescent lamp with a warm colour composition that would bring out the texture of the surroundings, and the work on anti-dazzle armature, accentuate the sense quality of lighting. By means of appropriate choices of shade size, the composition of colours and materials, the intention was that the consumer faced with a range of PH-lamps on the one hand would be able to satisfy a practical demand for effective distribution of light; on the other satisfy a psychosocial need to create domestic comfort in the home. In relation to a number of the models PH developed, often on commission, the ideal scenario, according to himself, would be that the home’s social, private and intimate rooms should be lit by several PH lamps, softly shining, so that the rooms would appear harmonious and invoke recreational comfort:

It has always been the intention that the PH lamp should be a lamp of the home. On account of its properties and its modern look it had to gain a foothold in offices and public rooms first. But is has been constructed with a view to its most difficult and
most distinguished task: that of providing lighting for the home. Today it is closer to achieving that end than it was yesterday, and each day we work to make it perfect. Our aim is make home and people beautiful, the evening restful.15

This bourgeois understanding of the home as the warm and easy fireplace, the site where one is comfortably recharged for the next working day in the public sphere, was also behind PH’s series of articles about domestic lighting that he wrote in 1928 for the Norwegian journal *The Art of Building*16. There in ‘the Inner Character of Light’, PH talks about the assumptions behind the PH-lamp: the ability to create a specific atmosphere with lighting. He compliments women on having an extraordinarily intimate, almost instinctive, sense of such things:

A very important problem of home lighting is the spectral composition of light. One often expresses this in popular terms: lighting should be warm and comfortable. The fact that the housewife demands that surely has a scientific explanation and justification. And when I, in what follows, present my idea of this problem, I must add, that I am still not in possession of the means to prove the truth of the hypothesis scientifically. But as I believe in reason in all things, I think it is more meritorious to put forward an explanation that may be correct than to abandon the question in advance. Most lighting engineers regard the demand of cultivated people for warm lighting as a fad or an absurd caprice. Nevertheless, we will never succeed in rationalizing domestic lighting unless we give in to the demand for warm lighting beforehand. People will not tolerate damned cold lighting. [...]17

In such statements, a biedermeier-like bourgeois conception of the home is appreciably venerated as the site of individual recreation and close human relations. One should not, however, interpret them as a badly concealed reactionary or commercial agenda. PH was and remained an inveterate opponent of the numb life forms of any bourgeoisie. And despite his well-developed talent for marketing, he did not buy the nostalgic and nationalist ideas that the home could entrench itself with phoney parlour romance against an alienating environment. It is therefore more important to maintain what those quotations sug-

15 Quoted from Jørstian and Munk (eds.) (1994): 162. This book does not include notes, but has a bibliography for each chapter. Therefore it is difficult to know where the quotation comes from. The generally available source references in the book suggest however that the quotation is from one of Louis Poulsen’s catalogues that today are to be found only in the archives of the firm itself.

16 My translation of the Norwegian title *Byggekunst*.

gest, namely that PH was not in opposition to bourgeois society, much less was in revolt against its division into spheres. On the contrary, he persevered in insisting on the utopian free and self-reliant bourgeois, and therefore chaffed the bigoted, authoritarian and self-repeating bourgeois and his idyllicized reconstructions of a golden age. It is in this manner that we can see PH as heir to his idol Georg Brandes: both revolted within the bourgeois class itself.

PH would not beforehand reject traditional forms and accept new ones, merely because they represented innovative initiatives. But he demanded that one look at the latter critically and analytically. Therefore he thought it a pressing task that a type of lamp was developed that would, on the one hand, improve the existing incandescent lamp, and on the other modernise the armature in a way that made it adaptable to different contexts of use. Besides his empirical examinations and his knowledge of the properties of materials and conditions of production, PH’s socio-cultural and hermeneutic engagement in the formation of home lighting conventions must be included as elements in the design of the lamp. In my view the fact that PH’s engagement was anchored in a bourgeois tradition distinguished the product differentiation of the PH lamp and secured its ‘popular’ breakthrough.

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Fig. 5. Table lamp from FDB’s catalogues 1930-32. Designer unknown.

Fig. 6. Karl J. Jucker and Vilhelm Wagenfeld’s table lamp, Bauhaus 1923-24.

Fig. 7. PH table lamp 3/2, 1927.

Paying some attention to those contemporary lighting armatures that PH distanced himself from, we may, for a start, look at an electric table lamp, probably imported, which
was advertised for in the catalogues of United Danish Cooperative Societies\(^\text{18}\) during 1930 to 1932 (fig. 5). The lamp presents itself as reminiscent of the imposing historicism that dominated the ‘Victorian’ homes of the grand bourgeoisie some fifty years earlier, that is around the time of the previous turn of the century. The armature, apparently bronze, is designed as a naturalistic sculpture of a naked, kneeling boy figure placed on a bulb shaped base. The half-bent, vertical arm is fastened to the base, and the cord is taken through the arm and up to the socket and the incandescent lamp, which is hidden by a dainty, umbrella-like silk shade.

Thus it is made clear to everybody that the distinguished function of this sculpturally modelled lamp, if probably moulded and mass-produced, was not to produce lighting for any practical purpose. On the contrary, lamps like this one had a symbolic and representative function: they manifested class membership. Its purpose was to appeal to conventional, bourgeois taste norms. Therefore the producer had to see to it that its style fitted in with a desire for signalling solidity of interior design, shared by the economic upper class as well as by the aspiring, lower-ranking social groups. It was the latter groups in particular United Danish Cooperative Societies had in mind by their distribution of the lamp. It was a part, along with dark, heavy and overstuffed furniture, ornamented textiles and carpets and a large still life collection of decorative bric-a-brac, that constituted an impressive staging of home interiors as a salver in which was reflected the ideal display of the (petit-) bourgeoisie. The meaning potential that the characteristic design of the lamp conveys is thus ambiguous, but this does not blur a clear intention: An eclectic use of historical styles should demonstrate adherence to tradition and simultaneously conjure up the home as a safe haven, a bastion against an obtrusive and dangerous world outside.

As contrast there is Karl J. Jucker and Vilhelm Wagenfeld’s Bauhaus lamp, 1923/1924 (fig. 6). The armature is an example of the emphatic use of industrial materials, and of the ‘pure,’ geometric base forms that characterize the pioneering period of the Bauhaus School (1923ff). Under the leadership of Walter Gropius (1919-1928), work was specifically directed to developing industrial prototypes. However, industry was not that receptive to these products, nor with their lamp which did not meet what consumers ex-

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\(^{18}\) My translation of the Danish name Forenede Danske Brugsforeninger, usually refered to as FDB.
pected from a lighting armature. Hence it was thought to be an unsaleable item. On the other hand, it was very agreeable to radical intellectuals. They were much more in tune with the consistency with which form unpretentiously laid bare function and conditions of construction: the cord is taken from the transparent base of the armature up through a transparent glass cylinder by means of a thin metal tube up to the socket in which the incandescent lamp is mounted. Here is also the support that (invisibly) carries the spherically shaped, shiny opal glass shade, the practical aim of which was to make the incandescent lamp diffuse uniform light to a room. The slender, nickel-plated metal border attached to the shade collar makes it visually connect with the chromium-plaited switch cover, which along with the matching diameter of the round glass plate of the base lends a sense of harmony to the whole. This symmetrical and well-proportioned composition is only broken in two vital, and therefore foregrounded, places: the brown cloth cord, and the brown string that turns the light on and off.

The fact that this 'rational' construction in reality had to be produced according to artisanal principles that added to production costs did not change its value as a signal among contemporary, critically, politically and socially aware consumers. Among these consumers it was primarily esteemed for its symbolic value that depended on a total negation of the product culture of bourgeois capitalism and nationalist romanticism. It is probably why, given the significance assigned to the lamp, it continues to be produced and has been designated a select lifestyle product by young, well-educated and internationally oriented design connoisseurs. Such appropriation is by no means in harmony with the intentions of the designers to mass-produce and overcome the class character of objects. But it is all the more indicative of the ideological premises of the lamp, of how consumers benevolently annexed the lamp and mirrored themselves in it.

From a historical point of view, the armature by Jucker and Wagenfeld is in all particulars a concentration of a series of stylistic conventions that retrospectively are identifiable as early 20th-century international, modernist avant-garde. Its principles of design came from an ambition to be completely free of all conventions. By a progressive, anti-authoritarian metaphysics of transgression, the movement had, in their own minds, presented a definitive rupture with irrational norms. That is why this lamp formally stands out in diametrical contrast to the stylistically eclectic lamp anchored in a despised com-
modernity and consumer culture governed by sentimental dogmas and commercial interests. The confrontation with the sentimental value of objects, their value as status symbols necessarily had to be represented in material and physical form as a purging of the intimate and simultaneously representative home decor of the ruling class, where natural daylight, flexible possibilities of interior decoration and bodily needs for self-expression were restricted.

To a certain extent, PH did not disagree with this diagnosis. He, too, identified what he considered signs of societal sickness, and he wanted his lamp to take part in a kind of healing process. But this reform utopia, he attempted to carry out by means of a pragmatic strategy, in contrast to the Bauhaus designers. The fact that PH consistently opposed traditionalism and modernism implies that he thought both design strategies were founded on perverted golden age construction, only with opposite signs. The nostalgic as the militantly progressive design ideologies operate with an idea that there really was once a cultural unity, and at a given point in time there was a Fall into that complex modernity in which industrial society as a rationalistic and capitalistic world of production, knowledge and action became absolute. However, there is disagreement if the slippage is bad or good, if it estranges or emancipates the individual.

That is precisely why PH in the photo sequence of the three lamps classifies both historicist and modernist armatures as communicative ‘signs’. In his view, both function as symbolic, representative markers of a specific, (style-) historical (that is, ideological) standpoint; both minimize the sensual, aesthetic and functional qualities and relations of lighting itself. And it is the latter the PH-lamp tried to address. This is clear from fig. 7 that displays the table lamp model 3/2, red/bronze, 1927.

It is quite evident of course that that armature has, formally and stylistically, much more in common with Jucker and Wagenfeld’s than the historicist armature whose designer in contrast to the others made a virtue about anonymizing his design. Like the Bauhaus armature the PH-lamp is based on a sober and balanced distributive principle, but from here all likeness seems to cease. The discreet, flat, round base and stand is in this PH-table lamp made in bright brass, while the upper part consists of three metal shades, their surfaces lacquered red, each terminating in a gilded edge, while the insides are bronzed. The upper shade (28,5 cm) is like an inverted soup plate; the shade in the
middle (14.4 cm) is like an inverted bowl, and the lower shade (7.5 cm) an inverted cup. Together they make up a logarithmic spiral, in which the angle between the shades and the rays of light is a constant. The system contains the electric incandescent lamp and sees to it that the curvature of the shades, visor bars, composition of materials and colours, makes for a golden, warm light slanting downwards without dazzle or deep shadows, while upwards it ends in darkness. In this way PH had determined, by means of a specific, visual and aesthetic design, where, how and why the lamp would be used: as comfortable, intimate home lighting, because that function was a feature of an eternal, human structure of needs.

The development of the PH-lamp system and its evolvement of an extensive assortment of lamps in particular from the end of the 1920s until the Second World War’s restrictions on materials and production, represents a thoroughly thought-out scheme for integrated, comprehensive problem solving. This does not mean, of course, that in actual fact it was the ultimate, modern lamp. That the 'contexts' of both an armature and light-
ing had to be taken into consideration must mean that solving the task was subject to a principle of ever new interpretations. Technical conditions, and in particular the available supply of incandescent lamps, measured the success of the armature. Only 30 years after his debut as lamp designer, on the introduction of the PH 5 lamp (fig. 8), did he accept the conclusion that the struggle to improve the longevity of the standard incandescent light bulb, its shape and spectrum, had been in vain. In connection with the launching of this model, that would turn out to be the biggest sales success of the entire range, he stated with self-irony and stoic superiority:

After behaving reasonably like a Christian for 33 years I have, as you will see in this pamphlet, embraced Mohammedanism – in my relations with the manufacture of incandescent lamps. For a generation I have believed that concern for consumers and reason would prevail, but now I’ve become a fatalist. I bow to destiny and have, with the permission of LP, constructed a PH lamp that you can put anything into: glowworms, Christmas candles and 100 W and metal wire bulbs. A fluorescent tube is, however, is at present too long.

All dreams are hereby renounced that any incandescent lamp technician might get interested in quality and produce lighting with fair regard to the properties of the human eye. Or, as an acknowledged moral axiom has it: you cannot demand from others, what you cannot do yourself. Or, in the language of lighting: the designer of armatures must not expect to find the slightest support from the manufacturers of incandescent lamps. To be sure, one or two individual manufacturers may sympathise, but the decisive guidelines are dictated by American and European companies that do not respect arguments, only sales graphs. Through great mental sufferings I’ve arrived at the realization:

*The designer of armatures must take for granted for all time the existence of incandescent bulbs.*

With PH5 PH had, for pragmatic reasons, definitively prevented dazzle and had compensated for the uniform, cool colour reproduction of the filament and the matt bulb, partly by screening the source of light so that it emitted only indirect light, partly by mounting three (later two) small inner shades in contrasting colours, orange-red and blue. PH’s ambition to build a flexible and harmonious armature that delivered a subdued (evening) light to the home, remained not only intact, but was closer to being realized than ever before.

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Form continued to follow function, as dictated by functionalism. But function did not follow rational let alone objective determinations of practical domestic lighting needs; it derived equally from certain psycho-social conventions associated with the home. By recognizing these relations, PH seemed to have shared at least one point of view with one his favourite aversions, Danish architect colleague Steen Ejler Rasmussen, whose conservatism had made PH nickname him 'Stone Age Rasmussen’. This fossil had in 1941 put forward a point of view about appropriate home decoration entitled ”Fireside Philosophy” that PH had to agree with, probably with some mortification. His commitment to the development of specifically ’domesticated’ models and readiness to meet bourgeois taste preferences as to armature assortment shows clearly:

[...] The words ’care’ and ’comfort’ have the same root. It is the mind that is behind that is decisive. It is something that cannot be measured or weighed, and that is why its raison d’être, even its existence is sometimes denied. It has been fashionable for a time, in progressive circles, to sneer at domestic ease and comfort as something obsolete, a superstition that has been finally abandoned along with tasselled furniture and antimacassar.

[...] You have to dig deeper and not just satisfy certain technical demands for light, air and warmth, but also include qualities, human feelings.\(^{20}\)

PH’s contribution to a presumed classless material culture that would create democratic interiors of efficiency and functionality was supplemented by similar beliefs rooted in a bourgeois conception of privacy and intimacy.

\(^{20}\) Ejler Rasmussen (1941): 97 and 108.
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