

## Are pot lights boring and overdone, or can they be tasteful? Experts weigh in



Toronto interior designer Dvira Ovadia uses pot lights in almost all of her projects, but reserves them for the right space. Here, she incorporated a staggered pattern of mini pot lights into a living room to increase the brightness of the space without competing with the existing architectural details.

VALERIE WILCOX/SUPPLIED

Recessed lights. Downlights. Can lights. In Canada, they're commonly called pot lights. Whatever the term, it feels like these ceiling fixtures are ubiquitous in homes these days. But some think they're a dim idea, preferring the put-down "ceiling acne."

Below, experts weigh in on whether they're a bright idea or a glaring mistake.

### What are pot lights?

Pot lights are small, illuminated discs that nest neatly within a ceiling. If chandeliers are showy extroverts, think of these lights as hardworking introverts.

They gained popularity in the 1960s in commercial and retail spaces because they provided task lighting for employees and spotlighting for merchandise without taking up too much headroom. They've since become a staple in many homes, in part because they're economical, easy to install and fairly unobtrusive.

## Where do they work well?

Toronto-based interior designer Dvira Ovadia uses pot lights in almost every project – but not in every space.

“They perform beautifully in kitchens, hallways and bathrooms,” she said, highlighting workhorse rooms that benefit from even task lighting. “In more atmospheric spaces like living and dining rooms, they can feel overly utilitarian.”

Like Ovadia, Scott Cleator, a licensed electrician and co-owner of Ottawa’s Lumos Electric, installs pot lights on almost every job. He thinks they’re a particularly smart option for basements, which don’t always have the highest ceilings. “Pot lights allow you to have more light but not take up headspace,” he said.

## Are there any drawbacks?

Yes. For one, their popularity means they can feel overdone.

“The con is the thoughtless, overprescribed grid [of lights] often seen in homes,” said Toronto interior designer Jennifer Worts. “A home should never feel like a retail showroom.”

What’s worse, the light isn’t always flattering. “Downlights can make you look horrible,” said Doug McMillan, a senior lighting designer with Think L, a Canadian consultancy specializing in all things illuminated. “They cast harsh shadows, having the same effect as telling a scary story with a flashlight pressed up under your chin.”

**That’s scary – literally.**



Glare is another drawback. “Sometimes they can just be too bright,” McMillan said, adding that his townhouse had pot lights when he moved in that drove him “nuts.”

Interior designer Jennifer Worts uses downlights with a subtle white trim to blend into a painted wood ceiling.

VALERIE WILCOX/SUPPLIED

“They were on a dimmer, and even when I had them dimmed down, they were emitting too much light.”

### **Remind me again why they’re popular?**

For one thing, they’re accessible. Prices vary, but inexpensive LED pot lights can cost as little as \$12 each.

“These days, it’s hard to find another kind of fixture for less than \$100,” said Cleator, the electrician. “They also tend to be more affordable because they take less time to install than other fixtures.”

### **In this economy, that sounds nice.**

Yes. That said, longevity can be an issue with cheaper lights. “Lower-quality pot lights, particularly those with plastic trims, can discolour over time and make a space feel dated,” said Megan MacNamara, director of design and production at 31 Westgate, a design studio and retail space in Halifax.

“It’s often worth spending a few dollars more,” McMillan added. “Downlights can still be affordable, but a few key considerations can also make the whole effect more high-end.”

## Considerations such as what?

In terms of the trim, metal tends to be more durable, though MacNamara prefers trimless lights that recess directly into the drywall. “They create a cleaner, more seamless ceiling plane,” she said.

For McMillan, the difference is in the technical details. “There are three things people should keep in mind when picking the right downlights,” he advised. “The lumens, the colour temperature and the beam spread.”

## Please break that down.

Colour temperature describes the warmth of the light and is measured in Kelvins.

The lower the Kelvins, the more yellow and warmer the light; the higher the Kelvins, the cooler or bluer the light.

“A general rule of thumb is that 2,700 Kelvins works well in a home,” McMillan said. “You often see lights up to 5,000 Kelvins at popular hardware stores. That’s too high.”

To Worts, anything over 3,000 Kelvins in a home feels too clinical. “It can strip away the soul of a room,” she said.

## Okay.

The beam spread, measured in degrees, refers to the angle of the light beam. The higher the degree, the more the light spreads across the room.

“Part of the reason people hate downlights is because of what people call pancake lights,” said McMillan. “They’re those flat discs where the light comes out at 100 degrees, which can be pretty obnoxious and create a lot of glare. It’s better when the light is pushed back from the trim for a more focused beam spread.”



Interior designer Megan MacNamara pairs recessed lighting with pendant fixtures to create a layered, custom aesthetic.

JANET KIMBER/SUPPLIED

The smaller the degree, the tighter the light beam. “I’m working with a designer right now who is specifying both 20- and 35-degree lights in a kitchen,” said Cleator. “That might not sound like a big difference, but a 20-degree light spotlights a table – and just a table. A 35-degree light brightens a wider area in a space.”

### **And what about the third thing?**

Lumens are a measure of brightness, describing the amount of visible light emitted from a source. The higher the lumens, the brighter the light. Like Kelvins, the lumens are typically specified on the packaging.

### **What about spacing?**

“The spacing of the lights depends on many factors, so there is no template,” said McMillan. “We rarely space downlights evenly in a grid pattern. That provides a uniformly boring experience.”

Instead, experts recommend layering – pairing downlights with other kinds of fixtures. “The result feels balanced and lived in,” said Ovadia.

### **This all sounds a bit complicated.**

Maybe, but to lighting pros like McMillan, the stakes are clear. “The wrong downlights can be incredibly frustrating,” he said. “With a little bit of effort, they can actually be quite beautiful.”

### **Final verdict?**

Do it if you’re excited by the thought of going off-grid.

Don’t if you think pancakes are better covered in syrup than stuck on a ceiling.