

## ÆSTHETICS

## LIGHT BULB MOMENT



STORY BY:

**ROBERT BEVAN**

PHOTOGRAPH BY:

**NIC WALKER**

**P**AUL HECKER of Hecker Phelan & Guthrie is one of Australia's leading interior designers. He has also threatened to become a smuggler, sneaking contraband into the country about his person. We won't say where. The booty is not drugs but light bulbs.

Since last November there has been a ban on importing traditional incandescent bulbs. You may already have noticed dwindling supplies on the supermarket shelf. From this November (or thereabouts) they will be banned from sale altogether and we will all be forced to use low-energy replacements. Expect to see light bulb mules tiptoeing carefully through airport customs.

But who could argue against an eco measure to help save the planet? A measure that reduces this country's emissions by an estimated 800,000 tonnes per annum? Well, plenty of people. First, there are the designers who despair at the ugly cold light that compact fluorescents emit and which is suitable only for a morgue. There is also the effect that these ugly bulbs will have on the look of a century of classic light fittings where the clean sphere of a bulb and the delicacy of the filament within are integral.

New forms of bulbs that mimic the shape and warm light of old tungsten bulbs are on their way but, given that Australia is such a small market and is way ahead of other countries in imposing such a ban, the world's main bulb manufacturers haven't rushed to get them into production. The ugly undimmable fluoro will be just about the only option for Australians.

These objections could read as effete in the face of the environmental benefits but only if those benefits are real. Energy will undoubtedly be saved but the results for the environment will be minimal in comparison with the benefits of changing the way the electricity itself is generated. Once again, it is consumers rather than producers who are being asked to change their behaviour. It is another one of those nannying quick fixes that is slowly circumscribing pleasure in our daily lives.

More pressingly, there are safety concerns with compact low-energy fluoros. For a start, each contains four milligrams of highly toxic mercury, and plans for their safe disposal have yet to be finalised. Be careful, too, if you break one. In the US, the Environmental Protection Agency is advising opening a window and leaving the room immediately for 15 minutes.

You must never use a vacuum cleaner or bare hands to clean up fragments and, if your clothes touch the waste directly, you must dispose of them. Fragments should be contained in a sealable bag (at a designated bulb recycling centre, if you can find one) not in your general waste. There will be countless millions of these bulbs to get rid of, which is not at all reassuring. Perhaps we should have looked more kindly upon the tungsten bulb until we found something more worthy to replace it. ■