

## Zestimate Schmestimate

by Andi Peterson Brown

Last week I met with some prospective sellers in Orinda to discuss putting their home on the market next spring. Like many sellers, they had printed out their home's Zillow Zestimate before our appointment. When I sat down, I saw it—on the table but off to the side, looming and waiting to pounce. I've done battle with the dreaded Zestimate before, and in fact, I have a handout for just such an occasion entitled *Why Zestimates are Inaccurate*. I had initially used stronger language in the headline, but I was advised over the shoulder by the husband that it was "off-putting."

In reality, I had already looked up the Zestimated value of their home and knew that they would be pleasantly surprised. My price opinion of their home was significantly higher by about 20%, but oftentimes my opinion is lower than the Zestimate. A Zestimate is a home valuation and price created by zillow.com's algorithm. It is based purely on numbers and recent sales in the area. While not always inaccurate, it is usually inaccurate.

When I give my opinion on a home's value, not only do I think about recent comparable sales, but I also take into consideration overall condition, appeal of layout and finish quality, lot usability, perceived negatives, deferred maintenance, a budget to get it ready for market, supply, demand, interest rates, the overall lending environment, and the overall economic environment. Zestimates don't take any of that into consideration, and that is why they su—, I mean are inaccurate.



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## Holiday Lights: Festive, Merry and Bright

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Festive white bulbs light up the outdoors.

Photo Cathy Dausman

Local electrician Rob Omo likes to drive around during December just to see what people do with outdoor lighting. He admits he's not a big fan of the programmed lights and music shows some homeowners put together, saying "it takes away the peace, quiet and tranquility of the season."

Light options today are myriad. Incandescent bulbs emit light as a byproduct of their heated filament. Neon, fluorescent and CFL lights use a gas filament. Halogen bulbs are bright – and plenty hot – and the bulbs themselves are fragile. The new LED, or light-emitting diode lights, deliver a computer chip glow and are basically cool to the touch. These low-power, high-efficiency lights may be shaped like a traditional bulb, but are also manufactured in strips and round "pucks." LEDs packaged in waterproof casings can be used outdoors and even underwater to highlight

pools and waterfalls.

Elemental LED's Director of Marketing Jim Puchbauer says LED technology uses 25 percent less power than traditional filament lights, and last roughly 50,000 hours. He says LEDs work well for libraries and art gallery displays since they emit neither harmful ultra violet rays nor damaging heat. REACH, Elemental LED's philanthropic arm, recently partnered with Orinda Arts Council to install LED lighting in the Orinda Public Library display cases.

Steve Lambert, owner/designer of Orinda's Garden Lights agrees that the new generation LED is the way to go outside, as they offer color tone, longevity and weatherproof lighting. He suggests residents use white lighting, which "brings out the nature of the landscape," or add a bit of temporary color to their exterior light scheme using colored lenses.

Exterior pathways and steps should be lighted first for safety, Lambert says, before moving on to decorating the trees. He suggests homeowners minimize "light pollution" – unwanted light spilling into your neighbor's yard – when designing outdoor illumination.

Simply winding inexpensive strands of low-power lighting around tree trunks and along branches gives a yard an almost Disneyland feel at night. And neighborhoods can also create area-wide magic by setting out luminarias made of tea candles set in sand-filled paper bags. Home improvement stores offer a plastic version as well. Moraga's Rimer Court has had a luminaria display for the past nine years (see the Dec. 8, 2010 Lamorinda Weekly story at <http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0420/pdf/Moragas-Luminarias-a-Bright-Christmas-Tradition.pdf>).

Any discussion of holiday lighting would be incomplete without including Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights. Rabbi Alissa Miller of Lafayette's Temple Isaiah explains the candles on the menorah are cumulatively lit over an eight day celebration. "The menorah is set into your window so everyone can see it," Miller says, recalling the powerful symbolism of light from a limited source at this darkest part of the year. Traditionally comprised of wax candles or wicks set in oil, electric menorahs are also available for safety reasons.

So look up, and light up your indoors and yards. Who knows, it may even ward off that year-end stress. Star light, star bright – fill your surroundings with decorative light!