

All About Windows

Now you can have style as well as energy efficiency and easy care with the new generation of windows.

by Adelheid Fischer

Isometimes think the windows in my 1939 bungalow aren't windows at all but instruments of torture left over from the Inquisition. I'll admit there probably isn't a window made that can muffle the vibrations of the booming bass from a neighbor kid's car stereo when it sets the panes chattering like a pair of wind-up-toy false teeth. But wouldn't it be nice?

If, like me, you're in need of new windows, you're in for a treat. Manufacturers have taken the work and worry out of windows, adding style and innovation to energy efficiency and easy care. Paul Hansen, director of the Izaak Walton League of America's Midwest office, says that the new generation of low-emissivity windows—with R values in excess of 5 on a scale of 10—offers big energy paybacks, particularly in new construction.

And if you think all windows come with right angles, look again. Standard offerings include so many unusual shapes that catalogues have come to resemble high-school geometry textbooks. In the last five years alone, says architect Rosemary McMonigal of McMonigal Architects, the choices have increased almost exponentially, largely because homeowners have begun to regard windows as a true design feature.

But before you buy, take some time to examine how you live in your house throughout every season, especially winter. Not just a cosmetic touch, windows do much more than simply lend a pleasing balance to the exterior of a house. Much research has been published about SAD, or seasonal affective disorder, confirming what we've all suspected about winter: that light deprivation, especially in northern climes, can



The "H" Window, or "housemother's window," from The H Window Co., allows you to flip the entire panel 180 degrees to make cleaning a breeze.

KAREN MELVIN/LANDFORM INC.

have an impact on emotional well-being, from mild listlessness to debilitating depression. So if like many Minnesotans you spend your winter work week coming and going in the dark, you might choose a window design that floods your weekend breakfast nook with morning sun.

However, as McMonigal observes, "a window is not just a way for light to come in but a way to look out." Thoughtfully placed, windows can create a series of experiences throughout the house and, like a camera lens, frame the world outside in surprising ways.

Skylights, for example, can enhance the serenity of a library by screening out a cluttered streetscape and training your attention instead on leafy treetops. A wide horizontal window can capture the restful expanse of a garden, while a narrow vertical one can crop a tantalizing view of a wooded path. Just remember: When it comes to beautiful vistas, bigger isn't always better. "Sometimes a view is more spectacular when you limit it," McMonigal says. As a visual aid, McMonigal's firm

uses full-scale cardboard cutouts in the design process to help clients determine the angles of greatest impact before they purchase a window.

Architect Sarah Susanka, of Mulfinger Susanka & Mahady Architects, uses perspectival computer drawings to illustrate how window selection can change the feeling of a room. She pays particular attention to pairing windows opposite doorways, noting that a sequence of such alignments throughout a house creates a feeling of spaciousness and establishes a connection to the site—a rather inex-

pensive way, she says, to lend character to a neutral house.

Whether you simply want to spruce up a few windows or reconfigure entire walls with new openings, window manufacturers offer a variety of options that let you transform your house. Marvin Windows' E-Z Tilt Pac kit allows you to upgrade the look and efficiency of existing windows by replacing only the crumbling sashes instead of the entire window frame. The do-it-yourself kit includes energy-efficient glass and snap-in jamb liners. Easy to handle and maintain, Tilt Pac windows can be installed and cleaned from the inside, and aluminum-clad exteriors make ladders and paintbrushes obsolete.

For more extensive changes, a little bit of design expertise can go a long way. McMonigal points out that, on average, windows account for about 10 percent of the total construction budget of a new house or a remodeling. "Investing in a good window is the most important thing you can do," she says. Susanka agrees and also urges her clients not to scrimp on purchasing

high-quality products with a good warranty and responsive service.

For starters, design professionals can make sure that a new configuration of windows meshes with the materials, proportions and character of your house, both inside and out. Many homeowners, McMonigal says, pay little attention to integrating new windows into the rest of the house, indiscriminately mixing double-hung with casement windows, horizontal with vertical silhouettes or the textured contours of true divided-light windows with the smooth profile of windows that sandwich removable grilles between sheets of insulating glass.

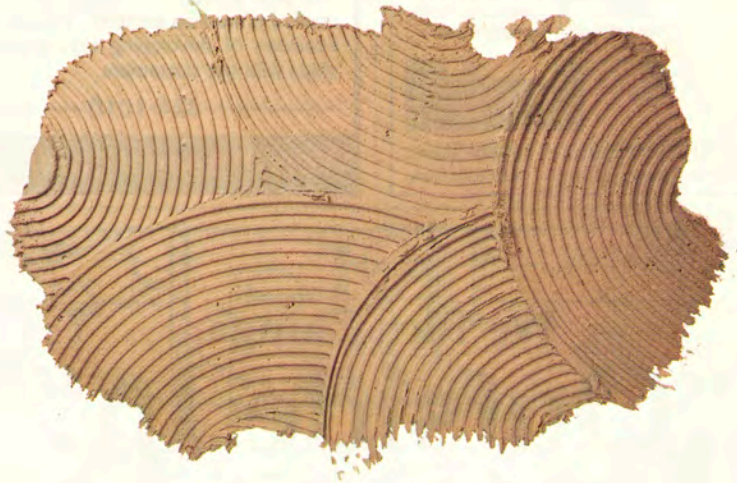
Professionals can also help you explore design solutions that satisfy your lifestyle needs or your house's special climatic conditions. And if you aren't satisfied with manufacturers' standard selections, you can call on your architect to custom design a window to frame that special view.

But the stock offerings of most companies nowadays may make a custom window the choice of last resort. Andersen Corp.'s line of Flexiframe windows—from isosceles and right triangles to angled and peaked pentagons—provides exciting design ideas for even your hardest-to-fit spaces. But both McMonigal and Susanka advise using unusual shapes sparingly. Susanka's clients, for example, often request a row of rounded-top windows over exterior doors. While they may look good from the outside, they appear cramped in rooms with standard ceiling heights, she says.

Where a historic or more traditional flavor is called for, Pella Products has just issued its Architect Series, which features a design vocabulary that recalls the elegance of older windows. Using arched and circle-head windows alone or in combination with others, the series' designs can suggest a range of architectural styles from Palladian to mission.

But what makes the Architect Series especially appealing is the combination of energy efficiency and slender mullions (the pieces that divide a window into grids). To make true divided-light windows (where window grilles actually separate individual panes of glass) energy efficient, manufacturers have had to use wide mullions, which are distinctly different from the thinner ones used in windows in most older homes. This series mimics the look of true divided-light windows by bonding slender

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mullions to the exterior of insulated glass sheets, making it a compatible window for additions on older homes.

But if vistas call for your undivided attention, take a look at Marvin Windows' continuous-glass innovations. For those Queen Anne turrets or contemporary angled walls, Marvin makes a curved-glass window that allows you to round corners without interruption. The company's corner window—insulated glass sheets bent at a 90-degree angle—lends the same transparency to the corners of your home, or it can be installed as a triangular bay window.

For especially large expanses of undivided glass in flat walls, Norwegian-designed H Windows fit the bill. The company's patented hinge carries twice the weight of the window, allowing vertical sashes to reach 4x5 feet and horizontal ones to run as large as 4x7 feet. And this same hardware lets you easily flip the window 180 degrees to make cleaning from the inside a breeze, earning it the nickname *husmorvinduet* (housemother's) window, or H Window, for short.

If you want a healthy dose of light with a fair measure of privacy, the sky's the limit with a skylight or a roof window. Cheaper, easier and less obtrusive than building dormers in an attic renovation, sky windows can be installed singly for spotlighting or ganged in interesting configurations for a floodlit effect. For a more economical alternative, Velux, a maker of skylights and roof windows, offers a fixed skylight with a built-in flap that screens dust and insects while introducing fresh air and venting humidity from kitchens and bathrooms. And for homeowners who have trouble manually operating sky windows, Velux features optional electronic controls and rain sensors.

Ease of handling, in fact, is part and parcel of most window designs on the market today. Most manufacturers offer easy access to exteriors with tilt, swivel or flip mechanisms. Blinds and shades inserted between insulating sheets of glass not only cut down on the maintenance of window dressings but help deflect and conserve heat.

In the end, this window revolution just adds up to giving you more time to linger over coffee in your room with a new view. ♦

Adelheid Fischer, former editor of Architecture Minnesota magazine, writes frequently on architectural topics.

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