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coatings that make them virtually immune to rot or wear. The coatings are on the exterior portions of the windows. The interior is normally left bare so the consumer can paint or finish it as he or she chooses.

These new windows have much better insulating properties. They come in single, double and triple glazes. Some offer special "E-glass" (low emissivity) designed to reduce heating bills in winter and air conditioning bills in summer.

Tom Pulliam, vice president of Pella Windows in West Bloomfield, advises homeowners to study their needs and discuss what features they want.

"Novice customers should look at product quality," Pulliam said. "On windows that are wood, they should look at craftsmanship. Lines should be neat, clean and put together well."

Wood should not be finger-jointed or patched on the interior, Pulliam added.

Consumers, he said, also may opt for aluminum-clad windows that are maintenance free. Quality of the hardware and weatherstripping should be studied.

If you refuse to replace your old windows, then consider buying low-E films. Several firms, including 3M and Courtauld Performance Films, make these adhesive films that have the optical clarity of glass and attach directly to existing windows.

There's another option that has been popular since "Miami Vice" aired on television: glass block.

Architects and makers love these things. No wonder. They are relatively inexpensive, yet they impart a rich look. They are especially useful in contemporary houses made with stucco exteriors.

Glass block is often used around bathtubs and showers to create a light-filled interior space that's opaque to an outside viewer. Sometimes they are used as accents around entry ways and in stairwells to admit light. And because they are made of two pieces of glass sealed in the middle, they are very energy efficient.

Skylights

Perhaps the most innovative use of windows is in the roof and near the ceiling. Roof windows, or skylights, can make a small space look large and infuse huge amounts of light into formerly dark areas. Clerestory windows add light and architectural interest.

What we used to call skylights, those translucent bubbles attached to the roof, have almost disappeared. Newer models are more like windows for the roof.

While there are many advantages to roof windows there also are some drawbacks.

Installing them is complicated. If there is space between the roof and ceiling, a light tunnel must be built to admit the light into the living spaces. Roof windows, especially those above crawl spaces, should also be vented to prevent heat

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