

# LIGHTEN UP / Skylights brighten rooms, improve ventilation and boost home values.

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**Article Excerpt** Although Grace Wagner loved her townhouse, she occasionally found it dark and depressing. "There were certain times, especially in the winter, when I would walk in and it would seem like a black hole," says Wagner, 70, a Fairfax real estate agent. Then she saw how a skylight had dramatically improved a client's house. She had a large dome skylight installed in her living room. And, just \$2,000 and one week later, her home had an open, airy feel. "I love it. The first day I walked in, I couldn't believe the difference," says Wagner. Skylights are a popular home improvement project. They not only brighten up a home, but they can also increase its resale value. And the modern versions are distant cousins of the old leaky skylights of the past, thanks to new technology and flashing systems. And with improved construction, new skylights also help provide better insulation, says Tom Harrington, San Francisco sales representative for Velux-America Inc., a major manufacturer of skylights. Best of all, skylights are a relatively inexpensive project that can be completed in about a week. You can spend as little as \$200 or as much as \$2,000 or more depending on the skylight's size, type and location. Handy types can even do the simpler ones themselves. Projects involving a lot of structural changes, however, are best left to the professional. The first decision is where to put the skylight.

Bathrooms, bedrooms and kitchens are the most common locations. But people also put them in dining rooms, living rooms, even closets. "Closets are traditionally a kind of dark place that skylights are great for," notes Mike Felix, owner of Saratoga Door and the Window, who designs decorative glass skylights. "We commonly put skylights in closets," says Steve Lohr, vice-president of construction at J. Lohr Properties, a Peninsula builder and developer. And, he adds, modern skylights block the ultraviolet rays that can fade clothes. Positioning the skylight in a room can be critical. "Homeowners should always try to light a room from two sources," says Ladd Bogdonoff of All Weather Roofing & Construction of San Anselmo, who installed Wagner's skylight. "Light from one source in a room can produce a glare. Set a skylight away from the other source (such as a window) to balance out the light."

Skylights can generally be installed in any roof, but certain roofs, such as tile, require more work. To keep costs down, avoid locations with existing electrical lines or pipes. Structural changes are expensive. TYPES OF SKYLIGHTS

There are two basic kinds of skylights: fixed skylights, which do not open, and operable skylights, which do. Fixed skylights are generally less expensive and easier to install. Operable skylights, however, provide ventilation. Frank

Brunini of San Rafael installed an operable 4-by-6-foot skylight with recessed lighting in his guest bathroom three years ago. The total cost, including materials and installation, was around \$4,500 to \$5,000. "It's an inside bathroom with no light and no windows," says Brunini, 52, a printer. The long, narrow skylight helps vent out hot air, which is especially helpful after steamy showers. Brunini was so happy with the first skylight that he eventually installed two more operable skylights: one in the master bath and one in the living room. These, he says, not only make the house brighter but also help keep it cooler in summer.

"We wanted to open up the (living) room," says Brunini. "So we installed the skylight above our piano and designed the room around it." Light from the west-facing windows did not fill the room, he says. "With the new living room skylight we're able to read comfortably in the day, something we couldn't do before." The master bathroom skylight helped solve a remodeling problem. Brunini wanted to enlarge the room, but couldn't move the walls. So he decided to make it seem larger instead. He opened up the room by adding a mirror along the wall farthest from the skylight. Operable skylights require more attention than their fixed counterparts. Many homeowners forget to close skylights on rainy days, and end up with water damage, says Glen Kitzenberger, a professional builder and an instructor with the Building Education Center in Berkeley. They require more maintenance, as well. Hinges sometimes need lubrication, and those with electronic controls can have malfunctions.

#### DIMENSIONS

Skylights come in all shapes and sizes. Many experts suggest that the square footage of the skylight should be about 10 percent to 15 percent of the square footage of the room. You can install a single large skylight, or two or three smaller skylights in a row. Modern skylights are made of acrylic or glass. Acrylic dome skylights are less expensive than glass, but are more prone to scratching from debris such as leaves and pine needles. "Another issue with acrylic is the possibility of yellowing over time," says Kitzenberger. "But with acrylic, you do get the dome shape some people like." Glass skylights do not come in dome shapes, although circular ones can be custom made. Anyone who has ever been in a house with an old skylight knows that the extra light can also mean extra heat. Glass skylights need a high-performance glazing for insulation. The glazing not only helps deflect excessive heat and ultraviolet rays in the summer, says Harrington, but also holds heat in during the winter. The best way to reduce heat, however, is to use double- or triple-pane glass in the skylight, Kitzenberger says. Some glass skylights consist of a layer of tempered glass over a layer of laminated glass, with argon gas in between. This sandwich effect helps keep glass from falling into the home if a glass layer is broken.

Skylights can be made of clear or opaque (textured) glass. Beveled glass is another decorative option. "I prefer white opaque glass," says Felix. "It diffuses the light, and you don't see the dust and the dirt." A 2-by-4-foot fixed acrylic dome skylight, the most common size, costs around \$150 to \$200. For comparison, a 2-by-4-foot operable glass skylight would run \$300 and up. A 4-by-4-foot operable glass skylight, the most common size for this kind,...