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Shedding New Light on Architectural Trends

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Sonoma Valley Sun

In the last few years, architectural glass has been increasingly hailed as the great problem-solver in residential decorating. It can create privacy without blocking views and, by the same token, bring light into the room. The buzz phrase for the latter is "architectural daylighting."

New technology has opened up a bright new world to manufacturers, designers and artists who are using it in every room of the house – as staircases, balustrades, counters, cabinets, backsplashes and even fireplaces. These professionals know that glass is strong enough to serve as a load-bearing wall or a floor.

Installing a glass floor may seem over-the-top to Sonomans who live in traditional homes, but that is just one of the fresh applications designers have found for this versatile material. Architectural glass, once relegated to windows, transoms, sliding doors, shower stalls and skylights, is now being seen in a new light. It can be used to mitigate blazing sunlight or virtually obliterate an unsightly view without turning a room dark. Specialty glass is being used to open up rooms by replacing bulky construction and to add interest to interior spaces.

"People often have an area where they want to add translucency or transparency to their home," says Christina Wallach of Santa Rosa's Wallach Glass Studio. "Maybe they want something between rooms or a jewel-box skylight" that bathes the rooms with natural light.

Now that craftspeople know that glass can be carved, cracked, cut, engraved, heat-sculpted, heat-strengthened, laminated, painted, sandblasted, slumped, stained or tumbled, home decorators could be virtually blinded by the array of options. The sky is the limit in terms of color, texture and design. And many of these new techniques can be incorporated with sunlight-resistant treatments.

As winter approaches, many homeowners want to make the most of the remaining natural light. Exterior glass has always been a saving grace for these folks, but until recently, their choices were fairly limited: clear or tinted or, if they lived in an Arts and Crafts-style bungalow, something stained or beveled.

Today there is another option for stained glass enthusiasts, whether they want color or simply that leaded look. Stained Glass Overlay, which has a franchise in Pleasant Hill, patented a technique that bonds Mylar film to a sheet of clear glass. SGO can apply the film to existing windows or to a separate, removable piece that can be clipped on. But glass is no longer merely functional; increasingly, it serves as a piece of art in its own right. An entire room can be transformed by updating or replacing a run-of-the-mill window with something made to order.

Wallach Glass Studio specializes in carving lighted crystal into the edges of a piece of glass, so that the glass becomes its own fiber-optic, explains Wallach. "We can also add a magical atmosphere with color."

For one client, Wallach created French doors with light etched into the edges so that they actually glow. "That's especially nice in the evenings, to have a set of softly glowing, pastel-colored glass doors."

Different kinds of glass can be used in different ways in the same home. Pedro Surroca, of Surroca Tile in Danville, remodeled a townhouse for a pair of empty-nesters. He replaced three bathroom walls with floor-to-ceiling sheets of Art Deco-style frosted glass and installed glass insets in all the interior doors.

But he cautions against excess. "If you put in too much glass, it loses its effect." Sometimes less is more; even something as simple as a shower enclosure can become artistic in the right hands.

"A developer asked me to design an enclosure with an Oriental theme," says Don McAdams of Architectural Art Glass in Benicia. "I carved images of cranes and ducks and cherry blossoms into heavy, half-inch-thick glass" that affords both light and privacy." Images of nature are definitely the hottest motifs of the moment. For one Bay Area client, Tim Czechowski of Artwork in Architectural Glass designed a shower enclosure in utilizing slumped glass (a process that uses gravity and heat to cast glass over a mold) to create a field of reeds and grasses that appear to be moving in the wind. For another, he created a vanity top in which a stream seems to be moving over river rocks.

Czechowski is in great demand now for his special glass that has withstood ballistic and earthquake testing. He's using it on projects ranging from see-through bridges over koi ponds to a deck overlooking the ocean on the northern California coast.

Now that glass floor doesn't sound quite so daring, does it?

