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INTERIORS / Bringing style and function into the home.

Window of Opportunity

* Gone are the heavy pinched pleats of yesterday. Today's treatments swoop, puddle, roll and fold for a wide range of looks.

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I once had neighbors who never put up window coverings in their bedroom. I thought they were exhibitionists; I now realize they were probably just paralyzed by the prospect. Swag or straight? Puddles or pleats? Grommet or Shirred? Shades, you say? Would that be Silhouette, Duettes, natural bamboo or oh-so-cool Conrads? And finials? What's a finial, anyway?

When did dressing a window get so complicated? Gone are the days when you could simply hang mini-blinds in your everyday rooms and three-pinch pleated drapes on a traverse rod in formal areas. Those looks--say the experts--are dead.

"People are into an unstructured, not rigid, look," says Jeff Cook of Granada Hills, who's been providing window counsel to interior designers for 40 years. "They want iron rods with just side panels that puddle slightly on the floor. They want drapery that looks as if it's been tossed up onto a pole and left to fall romantically to the floor. They want big spaces between pleats so they swoop, and they want soft-top drapery, if they want drapery at all." Structured, pinched pleats are definitely out.

More than half of the windows Cook covers today get shades, blinds or shutters.

For the do-it-yourselfers among us, covering a basic window in shades and blinds can cost anywhere from \$40 to \$400. It all depends on what you're going for.

A close watcher of window-ware trends, Karin O'Callaghan, director of merchandising for Smith & Noble, the leading national provider of mail-order custom window treatments, says wood blinds are her No. 1

seller. They're followed closely by Duettes, a shade that offers different fabric options for varying degrees of light control, followed by natural Roman shades, which draw up into soft folds and are the hottest trend by far with sales increasing 40% a year, O'Callaghan says.

The shades sometimes called matchstick blinds are made of natural materials such as bamboo, reed, rattan and sea grass, and complement a well-established trend of bringing the outdoors in, as well as a hotter trend for '99 that marks a shift to exotic fibers with an Asian twist. Natural wood blinds are outstripping painted wood blinds and metal blinds, also because people want a more natural look.

Going Beyond the White Curtain Rod

Also trending up is decorative hardware, which includes poles, rings and finials (those gadgets at the ends of the rod). Just five years ago, O'Callaghan says, most people thought of curtain hardware as white adjustable poles, period.

It's curtains for anything on a traverse rod. Instead, a whole new lexicon of hanging options has emerged. Rings have made a comeback and are big in casual settings. Grommets, the little metal eyelets, are hot with modern interiors and stainless steel hardware. The shirred top still works in country-style decor; flounce tops still look great with sheers; and the tab-top, once thought a timeless classic, peaked earlier this year and is trending down.

Other window-ware options that have stayed strong through the '90s include honeycomb Duettes, Silhouettes and Conrad shades. More function than fashion, top-down/bottom-up honeycomb Duettes prove popular for those who want a window covering in, say, a bathroom that they can lower from the top to let light in but maintain privacy. They also raise from the bottom like conventional shades.

For fancier environments, Hunter Douglas, the leading window-ware manufacturer and considered the innovators in the industry, offer Silhouettes, which debuted in 1991, and Luminette Privacy Sheers, which came out this year.

Both treatments are sheer fabrics that cover vanes that rotate behind the face fabric to control light and offer privacy. Silhouettes look like a soft, louvered shutter. Luminette Sheers have thinner vertical vanes and are more suited to full-length windows. They're especially nice in contemporary homes and commercial settings.

The Pricey Shades of Designers' Dreams

But the blinds that really make designers go weak in the knees are Conrad shades. Expensive and available only through exclusive interior designers or architects, Conrads look like a hybrid of rice paper and reed. Lighter than bamboo, each shade is custom hand-woven to fit even odd-shaped windows. They can hang alone or with side panels for a dressier look, and can roll up like Roman shades.

"They're fabulous," says Thomas Achille, a Los Angeles-based interior designer specializing in high-end homes and yachts. "They filter the world, their color is exquisite, and they feel very Occidental."

So the good news is also the bad: There's more than ever to choose from. The multitude of styles is enough to make you tuck up a bedsheet. But don't. Interior designer Virginia Knight, who teaches a course on surface materials for UCLA Extensions Design Program, says consumers can learn to navigate the options by starting with the right questions: What do you want from your window treatment? Are you trying to control light or provide privacy? Enhance a lovely view or block an ugly one? Add insulation? Cut energy bills? Block UV rays? And, finally, what look do you want?

If you plan to watch TV or work on a computer in the room you're treating, light control is critical. Privacy is important in bedrooms, baths and rooms with windows that face a street. In these cases, forgo sheer treatments and opt for wood blinds (not reed or matchstick), shutters, or opaque drapery that can completely block light. Shades made of bamboo or rattan, says O'Callaghan, are more of a fashion statement than a means of good light control.

If it's a view you want to enhance, think of the drapery as the frame on a piece of art. Done well, it focuses the eye and features a view that's worthy. In some cases the best answer is no drapery. If the view is not worthy, go for Conrads or sheer drapes that filter the light and soften the ugly, says Achille.

After Function, Consider Form

Once you've determined the treatment's function, then turn to questions of style. Is the room modern, rustic, classic or country? And what is your style? With drapes, "some clients want puddles of decadence and tiebacks, others are horrified at the thought," says Knight.

Window treatments can either support existing decor or dress a room up or down, says O'Callaghan. Formal treatments include swags and cascades

of fabric drapery. Casual treatments include wood blinds and shutters. Woven shades can be formal or casual and go well in many California homes. Striking a balance, many decorators go for a layered look pairing side panels with natural shades or blinds.

"Window treatments most often bomb when someone makes the wrong style choice," says Knight. Some examples: mini-blinds in a master suite, verticals in a room that calls for shutters, a fussy drape in a boy's room. The lines are the key. But choosing soft or straight lines in a treatment should depend on the room's style as well as the other shapes in it. For example, a soft, curved window treatment can enhance a contemporary room that has a lot of straight lines and hard edges; likewise, a linear window treatment can add structure to a room gone soft with overstuffed sofas and chairs. You can also use lines to change the shape of the window. Generally, a vertical rectangular window is prettier than a square, so use drapery to elongate it.

After line, color is probably your most important consideration. Your safest bet is a light color close to the color of the wall. Low contrast keeps your eye moving around the room. High contrast, or dark drapery on a light wall, will make a room feel smaller--though cozier, which might be the desired effect, says Penny Steyer, marketing communications manager for Hunter Douglas.

Solid neutrals are also easier to live with and better for resale, but prints add cheer. Knight likes to save patterns for kitchens and kids' rooms and use simple neutrals in the living room, dining room and master bedroom.

Budget Makers and Breakers

One reason many people shy away from buying window treatments is because they can be so expensive. To plan your window decor around your budget, here is a general idea of what various treatments cost for a 4-by-4-foot window, not including installation.

- * Vinyl mini-blind: \$38.

- * Roller shade in solid cotton: \$46.

- * Aluminum mini-blind: \$93.

- * Durawood blinds (made of polymer and wood pulp to look like wood) come painted in white or off-white: \$124; with decorative tape add \$20.

- * Natural wood blinds: \$211; with tape add \$30.

* Architectural, plantation or classic shutters: \$400 to \$500.

* Silhouettes: \$410.

* Conrad blinds: \$550.

* Side panels to the floor (48 by 84 inches): \$140 for basic fabric; \$200 for higher-grade fabric. Cost is per pair and does not include hardware or lining.

Special fabrics and custom fabrications are where costs really soar. Fabric costs can run from \$5 to \$25 per yard for cotton, to \$20 to \$100 a yard for silk, with linen somewhere in between.

PHOTO: Contemporary treatments often play up the window itself, rather than hiding it. Silhouettes blinds, left, are a choice for diffusing light and offering privacy.

ID NUMBER: 19990826fh1s80gy

PHOTOGRAPHER: Hunter Douglas

PHOTO: Other options include custom wood shutters, above;

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PHOTOGRAPHER: Hunter Douglas

PHOTO: expensive Conrad shades, far left, at top, a decorator favorite;

ID NUMBER: 19990826fh0af1gy

PHOTOGRAPHER: Conrad

PHOTO: and Hunter Douglas Vignette shades, bottom far left.

ID NUMBER: 19990826fh08emgy

PHOTOGRAPHER: Hunter Douglas

PHOTO: (2 photos) Fanciful hardware, below-- such as iron curtain rods, glass finials and decorative tiebacks--is popular.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: Smith & Noble Windoware

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