

Skylights In Small Spaces

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The 10 inch diameter Sun-Tek Tube sells for about \$150 and brings light to small spaces.

Skylights, once a dramatic design statement reserved for spacious living areas, are going into the closet. "It makes it easier to see what's in there," says Melissa Morgan, who put a 10-inch tubular skylight in the dressing room of her Arlington, WA home. The 55-year old horseback riding instructor also installed the setups in her bathrooms and hallways. "The natural light is brighter than fluorescent bulbs and it doesn't distort colors." Ms. Morgan is among a growing number of homeowners who are illuminating even their smallest rooms with a new generation of skylights. The tubular skylights filter sunlight through a clear dome on the roof and direct it down a reflective tube to a light diffusing lens on the ceiling. The circular fixtures, from 10-22 inches in diameter, look more like ordinary ceiling lights than traditional skylights. They also cost a lot less than regular skylights, and installing them is much cheaper; total cost, including installation, is \$400 to \$600, compared with \$1,200 to \$3,500 for traditional skylights. Do-it-yourself kits are also available. Because the tubes are narrow, they can be routed around beams and into different parts of the house. Home builders such as Del Webb Corp. of Phoenix have even started offering tubular skylights as an upgrade in some communities. "We've put tubular skylights in every room you can think of," says Eric Gaffka, owner of Ultra Beauty, Inc., a skylight dealer in Port Orange, FL. These days, he says about 75% of the homeowners he serves are choosing tubular skylights over traditional ones, compared with some 25% three years ago. Tubular skylights were introduced in Australia in the 1980's by Solatube International; the company, now based in Vista, CA, brought them to the U.S. in 1992. Since then, new manufacturers have emerged, along with innovations ranging from versions with built-in electric lights to models that included ventilation units. Demand has continued to grow: Sun Tunnel Systems, San Jose, CA, for instance, says its sales have doubled each year since 1996. Although tubular skylights don't provide a glimpse of the sky, they reflect more light than regular skylights. With the lenses that are used to diffuse the light, a tubular skylight that's just 1 foot in diameter provides as much light as a 2-foot by 4-foot traditional and distributes it more evenly, says Don Natale of Tru-Lite Skylights Inc., a manufacturer in Englewood, CO. "Even when it's cloudy, our home is brighter," says Flo Limpert, who installed 17 tubular skylights in her Edgewater, FL home. Ms. Limpert, 58, a homeowner, even put skylights in her family's laundry room and airplane hangar, where her husband stores one plane and is building another. Indeed, Roberta Nitzel, 59, a retired nurse, who recently added tubular skylights to the kitchen and bathroom of her Lakewood, CO, home, says that they shine on starlit nights. "I'm constantly thinking I forgot to turn off the lights," she says.

~ Nancy D. Holt