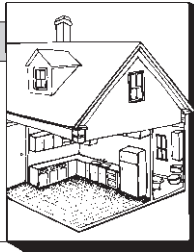


Tub and Shower Enclosures

by Lynn Comeskey



Shower enclosures are one of those bathroom fixtures that haven't gotten a lot of attention. One looks like another, and none of them look very good. But like medicine cabinets, there has been a real shift in the materials, design, and price of tub and shower enclosures in the last few years.

I Can See Clearly Now

Without question, the biggest change in shower enclosures has been the increased use of clear glass. Almost all of the units we have installed in the last few years have been clear. Although clear glass enclosures are less private and require frequent cleaning, they make the bathroom appear larger and show off expensive tile jobs in the shower. There are too many other neat features in bathrooms today to let a shower enclosure dominate.

This trend is most prevalent in high-end work according to a Kohler product manager and confirmed by local installers. Also at the high end are smoked and tinted glass, but they represent less than 5% of sales. Most lower priced units—the majority of the market—are fitted with obscure or etched glass.

A trend that emerged about two years ago, and is really gaining momentum at the designer level, is enclosures with enameled frames (see photo). White is by far the most popular color with almost second. Other typical colors are black, red, gray, and silver. We end up paying a premium of \$100 or so for enameled frames. But nationally, "silver" and "gold" still have the lion's share of the market at 75% and 20% respectively. Preference for gold frames seems to be coupled with clear glass at the high end.

But judging from last April's Kitchen and Bath Industry Show in Chicago, the hottest idea in shower enclosures is curves. Beauties from both sides of the Atlantic were represented. The one I'm most familiar with is made by Basco. Limited to corner units, they offer two sizes: 37x37 inch and 48x36 inch. Their enclosures start at about \$700. The matching fiberglass or acrylic bases start at approximately \$500 (or you can use their template to produce a tiled pan to fit). However, if price is no object, Hansgrohe was showing a round, acrylic "Shower Pavilion" plumbed with seven different shower heads and a hand shower that lists for \$25,000.

What We Use

Kallista was the first to offer a high-quality enclosure nearly a decade ago. Their imported extrusions and fittings and domestic 3/8-inch tempered glass (it's 3/16 inch thick in most enclosures) are impressive, with basic units starting at approximately \$1,000. One advantage of high-end units like these is the thicker glass which allows you to eliminate corner extrusions by mitering the glass panels. This increases the cost by 5% to 10%, but improves the look of the enclosure dramatically. Even without mitering the glass, high-end units are difficult to install because there is little adjustment in the frame and the



Kohler's Profile Shower uses cylindrical, extruded aluminum supports finished in high-gloss enamel colors to enclose a 1/8-inch clear glass door and 1/4-inch glass panels.

glass is very heavy. The first one we tackled took us a couple of days.

Another high-end brand that we install occasionally is made by The Majestic Shower Company. They import their extrusions and fittings from Kallista's original supplier, Majestic of the United Kingdom. Majestic's extrusions and fittings have a heavily anodized finish which is machine and hand polished. The thumb test is a good indicator of the quality of the finish. Hold your thumb a 1/2 inch above the metal surface; if you can see the individual lines of your thumb print, you have a good finish. A heavier anodizing is necessary in order to polish it enough to get the finer finish.

But for most people, reality is located well below \$500. A no-frills tub enclosure—chrome with obscure glass—costs about \$135 plus \$65 for installation in this area. A shower enclosure with the same description runs from \$135 to \$360 depending upon the number of panels; installation runs another \$75 to \$150. From there, an additional charge is levied for clear glass (\$40 to \$110 depending on the number of panels), and gold trim (\$30 to \$70). You also pay a percentage premium for a non-standard height or for a half wall.

What we look for in selecting a brand of shower enclosure is a good finish, well-designed gaskets, doors that move and shut securely, and extrusions that cover for some irregularities but don't look heavy and ugly. Our clients like frameless doors and open tracks on sliding units; but as usual, there are trade-offs. Frameless doors are easier to clean but aren't as well supported. Open track units look nicer but closed tracks are stronger. One thing I've not had any luck with is sliding shower doors. The ones I've used were embarrassingly wobbly and flimsy because of the height involved.

Installation

Since most of our showers and tubs are custom installations, we sub out the enclosures. It usually takes about ten days to make up the tempered glass and get the installer on the job.

We have used several companies in the past that specialize in shower enclosures, but the guys they sent out to measure and install were true Neanderthals. Although the installations didn't draw any complaints, the attitude and habits of the installers sure did. We've since switched to a glazing contractor who also handles our mirrors and many of our windows, and we've had no problems.

Some contractors like to install ready-made units themselves. Tub enclosures are relatively easy since their sliding doors are adjustable for plumb. Less expensive shower units typically have tolerances of at least one inch for out-of-plumb walls so they don't present an unusual challenge. Higher-end units with no fillers and tight tolerances should be left to a specialty installer. The glass will have to be cut out-of-square if the fit isn't near perfect.

Installations over fiberglass or acrylic shower units present few problems; tile is a little trickier. Be sure to use a sharp carbide bit and a low impact hammer drill. But first, check to see if the tile is at all loose where you'll be drilling. If it is, you're taking a chance of chipping or breaking it no matter how careful you are. And if the tile isn't replaceable, it goes without saying that you'll want to send in the first string to do the installing. Also, remember not to drill into the sill or curb; let gravity and silicone do the work. They both work great. (Our contractor uses GE Contractors' 1000 Silicone or Sanitary White that contains a mildew inhibitor.)

Maintenance

Regular maintenance with clean water and a squeegee will keep clear glass spotless; there are also some glass cleaners with wax that will help water, and the soap and mineral film it carries, roll off the glass. But the homeowner will still have to scrub the glass and the metal occasionally. Some of the glass and metal cleaners that will cut through the residue are Hi-Sheen, Bath-Brite, and Limeaway. The only caution is not to leave them on the metal over an extended period because they're acidic and can remove the finish. ■

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