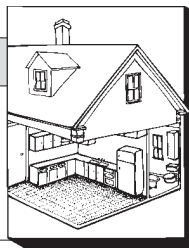


Making Small Baths Feel Bigger

by Paul Turpin

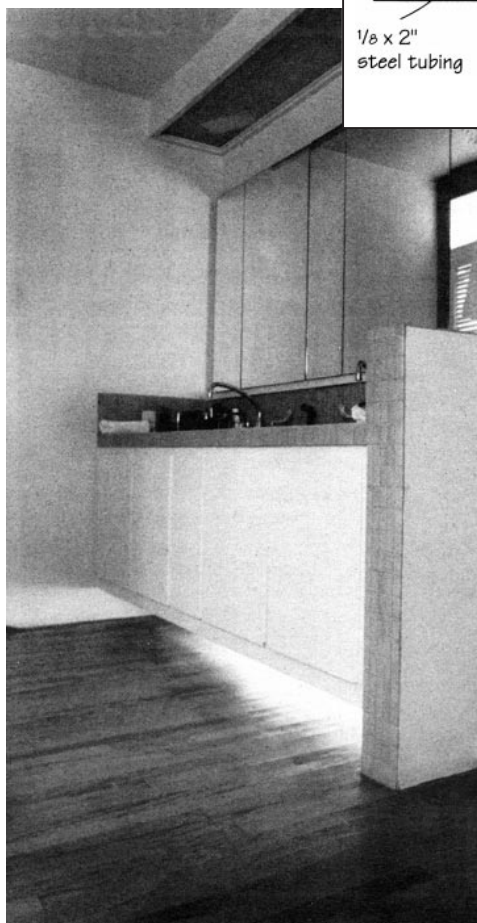


Most of the bathrooms we remodel are at least ten years old. These are almost always small rooms so, unless our customers are willing to build an addition or move some walls around, we're stuck with the original size and outline.

Since there's little you can do to make the fixtures themselves take up less space, we rely on color, light, layout, and some other design tricks to make the room appear larger.

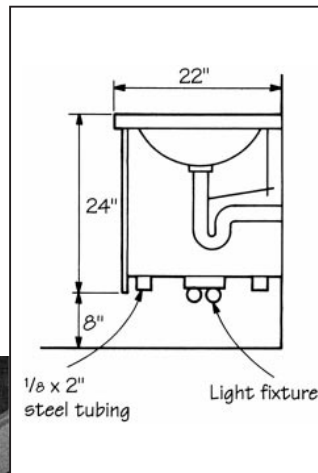
Creating Floor Space

The lower third of the average bathroom is crowded with fixtures. Yet, according to design rules, the more floor space that is visible, the bigger a room appears. Dining rooms are a perfect example: While the table typically occupies a large area at the center of the room, you can see the floor underneath it. As a result, the table doesn't seem as massive as its sur-



face area suggests.

So how do you translate this principle to the bathroom? Claw-foot tubs are a good way to open up some floor space, but they are undesirable or too expensive for many homeowners. Pedestal sinks, which have become as popular in the past ten years as they were in the 1920s, work well since they have a small footprint. But more often, customers need the storage



Floating vanity. The vanity floats 3 to 5 inches above the floor, sacrificing a few inches of storage, but creating the illusion of added floorspace. Steel tubes support the cabinet (detail above) and a fluorescent fixture provides soft accent lighting.

area and counterspace that only a vanity cabinet can provide.

The solution I've found is the "floating vanity." Instead of sitting on the floor, this vanity is raised about 8 inches off the floor, and is supported by two steel rails that are bolted to the walls at each side of the unit (see photo). The countertop is still at the same height but you lose the kickspace and about 4 inches of vertical cabinet space. However, this permits the flooring to continue under the vanity and back to the wall.

It's usually impossible to use stock cabinets so the vanity needs to be custom made. When you're discussing the project with the cabinetmaker, it's critical that you determine the vertical height needed for the sink and its waste-piping. Make sure there is space for the pop-up drain assembly, and room for the sanitary-tee (or san-tee) to which the trap-arm connects. I usually connect the trap arm 18 inches above the floor, but I've seen existing connections as low as 12 inches from the floor.

A normal vanity is 33 or 34 inches high, but depending on the sink, or the client's preference, you may have to go higher. If you're roughing in a new waste line, make sure you consult with your plumber to decide exactly where the san-tee should go.

For the steel rails that support the vanity, I use 1/8-by-2-inch square stock. I've spanned up to 8 feet with this steel, and then watched the electrician stand on it while installing the overhead light fixture with no noticeable deflection. I found suppliers for the tubing under "Steel Distributors and Warehouses" and "Metals" in the yellow pages.

In smaller baths, the vanity is often only 30 inches wide (the minimum for a plumbing fixture). This smaller size eliminates the need for the steel rails since the vanity can be screwed directly to the walls. In this case, I usually minimize the height of the cabinet in small rooms so that it just covers the water and waste piping under the sink. This works in powder rooms since there is usually less storage demand.

Enhancing the Illusion

You can do a lot with color, line, and light to make small baths feel larger.

Color. By now, most of us know not to paint a small bathroom brown. Dark colors feel heavier, while light colors seem to recede and make a room feel more spacious. Dark colors are not forbidden in small baths, but keeping them low in the room, and using lighter shades as you go higher, keeps the feeling of mass at the level of the fixtures. In this way,

the portion of the room above your waist feels bigger, which seems to give you more elbow room.

For instance, use a deeply shaded wainscot, either tile or wallpaper, that's between 30 and 42 inches high. The paint or wallpaper above this should be a lighter shade, while the ceiling should be even lighter (usually bright white). In traditional homes, a picture-rail molding set several inches below the ceiling can be the transition between the wall and ceiling colors.

Line. Another way to create spaciousness is by using lines to direct the eye. In a square room, for example, lay ceramic or vinyl floor tiles at a 45-degree angle. This way, the joint between the tiles attracts the eye across the diagonal of the room. This is especially beneficial in an L-shaped room, since this provides a longer diagonal.

Using a chair-rail molding at the top of wallpaper or wooden wainscot creates a horizontal line that the eye will follow around the perimeter of the room. Using wallpaper with vertical stripes on top of this draws the eye up, away from the mass of the fixtures.

Light. The best design and installation job will still feel like a cave if it's poorly lit. If the bath is windowless, or if the windows look into a solid wall or a shady grove of trees, consider a skylight. For nighttime lighting, I try to provide at least three levels: dim (for night-lighting), normal, and very bright. Even with a single fixture, you can achieve these levels with a high-wattage bulb on a dimmer switch. A three-way bulb will reduce the humming noise at low settings.

A fringe benefit of the floating vanity is that you can use the space below the cabinet as a light valance. This provides indirect lighting without glare that's ideal for a leisurely bath or for those midnight trips to the bathroom. This light could be either a standard fixture box or a plug-in unit with a switched plug in the back wall. Set the fixture as high as you can to let brooms and mops forage under the vanity without hitting the bulbs. If you want to get really fancy, wire a motion-detector switch, so the light will turn on when you walk into the room at night. ■

Paul Turpin is a Los Angeles-based remodeling contractor who specializes in kitchen and bath design and remodeling. If you have questions about the design or renovation of kitchens and baths that you'd like considered in this column, write to K&B, JLC, RR 2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.