

Bathroom Trends from the K & B Show

by Dave Holbrook

The kitchen will always be the social center of a home — just throw a party and see where most of the guests wind up. But from the look of the bath exhibits at April's Kitchen and Bath Industry Show in Chicago, visitors may start showing up wearing towels. The playful fixtures and amenities available for the contemporary bathroom go beyond mere considerations of functional hygiene to suggest that, in some homes at least, bathrooms are evolving into multipurpose luxury centers.

Water World

Shower spa enclosures are a space-saving alternative to a jetted whirlpool tub (see Figure 1). Some enclosures include programmable aqua-massage, music, video, mood-enhancing colored light, and aromatic vapors. Pearl Shower's *Apoge* (\$3,405 base price) incorporates a whirlpool foot massage in a deepened neo-angle base, along with back massage sprays in a shower seat with a sculpted backrest.

Foreign and domestic spa options abound, but a big problem with buying from a foreign maker without U.S. distributors is the inability to try before you buy. For example, the hinged doors I tried on one corner-opening unit required sequenced closing and some fussing to make the stile align and seal. Not what your average user is going to put up with, especially after paying through the nose for a high-end shower.

Body sprays — vertically oriented bars with multiple nozzles, or multiple wall-mounted heads — hit the bather with spray from all directions. Hansgrohe and Kohler make preplumbed shower panel consoles (Figure 2) with shower-



PEARL

▲ **Figure 1.** No more waiting for the whirlpool to fill; a luxury shower spa provides instant gratification in less time and space, but for the same kind of money. Features include whirlpool footbaths, sauna steam units, massaging body jets, and more. Jacuzzi (above left) adds TV and stereo CD to the J-Allure, which retails for \$12,900.



◀ **Figure 2.** For custom and remodel enclosures, a preplumbed shower spa tower from Hansgrohe simplifies multiple head installation. All that's needed is a connection to the hot and cold water lines.



Figure 3. Big-diameter multi-jet showerheads, like this one from Jaclo, provide a rainshower effect by increasing the area of shower coverage with up to 90 jets in a single head. Rubber nibs dislodge mineral deposits at the flick of a finger.

head, body jets, and handheld massage spray. All that's required is connection to hot and cold water lines, making for an uncomplicated shower remodel. Hansgrohe's basic *Exclusiv* panel and Kohler's *BodySpa* both start in the \$2,500 range. For a multiple head shower to be effective, however, water pressure had better not be a problem. A Hansgrohe technician advises that the minimum satisfactory working pressure of the supply is 44 psi.

Big heads. Plumbing fixture manufacturers are showing off their big "rain" heads — 6- to 10-inch-diameter showerheads with up to 90 nibs, or jets. One convenient feature worth looking for is a showerhead with flexible rubber nibs (Figure 3), which can be cleared of mineral-deposit clogs simply by rubbing them with a finger.

Europhoria, Europhobia

For innovative styling, Europe is hard to beat, as manufacturers here at home are obviously aware. Though Euro design is emulated by U.S. manufacturers, the status appeal of the German and Italian stuff still offers plenty of temptation to architects and homeowners, but elicits groans from U.S. plumbers because of the metric fittings.

I'm okay, Eurokay. A few manufacturers have adapted their systems to integrate seamlessly with ours. German manufacturers Grohe and Hansgrohe, for example, have established U.S. subsidiaries, and calibrate their products to be compatible with the American plumbing system. Aquaware America imports Italian-made bathroom fixtures that have been reconfigured for no-hassle American hookup.



Surface-Mounted Sinks

Surface-mounted sink basins may signal the demise of the old standard vanity base, as just about every manufacturer seems to be promoting its version. Resembling a large salad bowl or yesteryear's dry sink, the lav sits on the surface of, or is recessed partway into, a suspended countertop. The faucet and controls are either deck- or wall-mounted. The look is typically spare and compact, making it a good choice for a small bathroom (Figure 4). The basins are made of every imaginable material, including ceramic, glass, metal, solid-surface material, stone, and even wood. Glass is used to unusual effect in monolithic basin tops, translucent colored bowls, or undermounted in a countertop and backlit.

More trans-Atlantic trends. Perhaps as strong an indication as any of our

Figure 4. Bathroom lavatories have taken an arty turn away from the old vanity drop-in bowl. Countertop basins sit on furniture-like side tables, low-profile ledges, or wall-hung brackets, and may be made out of stone, wood, glass, metal, solid-surface material, or ceramics. Shown here (counter-clockwise from upper left) are units from Curvet, Transolid, Kohler, and Colorwash.



Figure 5. The bidet is struggling onto our shores in growing numbers and versions, from “multi-tasking” heated toilet-seat replacements (Toto’s Chloe, \$700, at left) to dedicated fixtures. The preferred location for a dedicated bidet (right, from Toto) is adjacent to the toilet.

merging global cultures is the growing promotion of bidets and toilet/bidet combinations, with retractable water jets and adjustable pressure (Figure 5). Taken for granted elsewhere, bidets — like soccer, until recently — are still playing catch-up in the U.S. The *Kitchen and Bath Business 2000 Market Forecaster* predicts that around 98,000 bidets will be installed in the U.S. this year. Just don’t call it a Euronol.

Towel warmers have migrated across the big pond, too. They operate between 140°F to 170°F, using one of three basic means to radiate heat through their metal (brass) tubing: electric resistance, dual-fuel (electrically heated oil-filled tubing), or hydronic circulation. Warm towels are cozy, of course, but also dry quickly on the rack, eliminating smelly bacterial growth. Configurations run from a simple S-curve to elaborate racks large enough to do double duty as room heaters (Figure 6). Warm, dry towels don’t come cheap, though — most rack prices start at around \$500.

Faucet News

Grohe’s *Grohtherm* temperature control valve features dial-in temperature control between 70°F and 110°F, with a safety detent at 100°. Water temperature remains constant within 1°F of the preset; a detent override button on the control allows those who like it hotter to crank up the heat.


On the installation side, Moen is promoting its *M-Pact* line of fittings. Once you install the valve bodies, the trim and controls can be swapped in and out as easily and as often as your customer’s fickle mind changes. Price Pfister’s *TwistPfit* system makes it possible to install faucets entirely from the top of the sink. Once the valve’s in place, water connectors snap on below (Figure 7). The official recorded time for a first-time installer at the show, mounting a demo faucet, was 20.45 seconds. It’s going to get crowded out on the links. 



Figure 6. Towel warmers win instant converts on contact. Hinge-It’s electrically heated Model 3200 (above) starts at \$120 in coated steel, with stainless steel and brass tubing available at a higher cost.

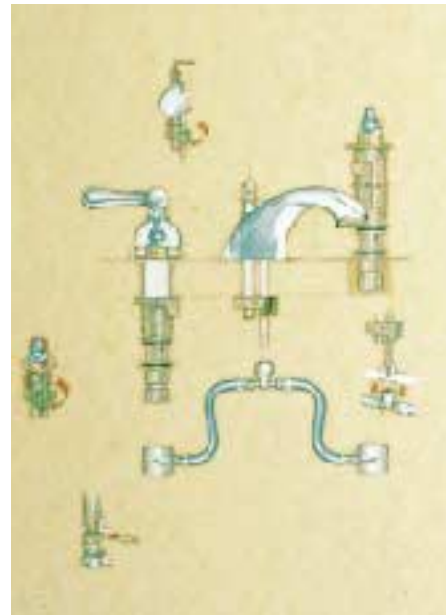


Figure 7. No more banged heads: Price Pfister’s *TwistPfit* faucet installation system enables the plumber to install the valve working from the top.