BY LYNN COMESKEY

CUSTOM TUB & SHOWER ENCLOSURES

Without question, the biggest change in tub and shower enclosures in recent years 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 attractive tile jobs in the shower.

This trend is most prevalent in high-end work. Smoked and tinted glass are also used at the high end, but they represent less than 5% of sales in my local market. Clear glass is used at least 75% of the time, even on lower-priced units.

C. BATES

WITH CAREFUL INSTALLATION, EVEN MODERATELY PRICED GLASS UNITS CAN GIVE THE BATHROOM A HIGH-END LOOK

Options

Enclosures with enameled frames emerged as a trend in the late 1980s, and are still popular with designers. White is by far the most popular color, with almond second. Other typical colors are black, red, gray, silver, and gold (Figure 1).

Kallista was the first to promote this type of high-quality enclosure, nearly a decade ago. Their imported extrusions, fittings, and 3/8- or 1/2-inch tempered glass (compared with 3/16 inch in most enclosures) are impressive, with basic units starting at about $1,000. The thicker glass allows you to eliminate corner extrusions by mitering the glass panels (Figure 2). 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 very little adjustment allowance in the frame and the glass is very heavy. The first installation we tackled took us a couple of days. I now hire experienced glaziers to install these units.

Majestic is another high-end brand that we install occasionally. This company imports its extrusions and fittings from Kallista's original British supplier, also named Majestic. Majestic's extrusions and fittings have a heavily anodized finish that is machine- and hand-polished.

For several years, there has been a big price gap between the standard garden-variety enclosure and the high-end enclosure. On comparably sized units, the cost difference could be as much as $800. Finally, though, manufacturers are filling the price gap. As an example, one manufacturer, Arizona Shower Doors, is now offering a Euro-style tub enclosure with 3/8-inch glass and heavier and more polished extrusions for only $200 to $400 more than a standard enclosure.

For most customers, we need to keep the enclosure cost to well below $500. A no-frills tub enclosure — chrome with clear or translucent glass — costs about $170 plus $85 for installation in this area. A shower enclosure costs $200 to $500 installed, depending upon the number of panels. There's an additional charge for gold trim ($30 to $70). You also pay a premium for a nonstandard height or for a half-wall, which requires custom cutting (Figure 3).

What we look for when selecting a glass shower enclosure is a good finish,

COURTESY OF CENTURY SHOWER DOOR

Figure 1. *Enameled frames are available in a variety of colors and styles, making them increasingly popular with bath designers.*

COURTESY OF MAJESTIC SHOWER CO.

Figure 2. *The thick glass used in high-end shower enclosures allows frameless glass panels to be joined at corners without corner extrusions. The tolerances are close, however, so installation is best left to a glazier.*

well-designed gaskets, doors that move and shut securely, and extrusions that cover for some wall irregularities but don't look heavy and unattractive.

Our clients often prefer frameless doors and open tracks on sliding units, but there are tradeoffs. Frameless doors are easier to clean but aren't as well supported. Open-tracks are L-shaped, with a plastic guide in the middle to hold the doors. These look nicer than closed tracks, but closed tracks are stronger. If someone leans against the door of an open-track unit, the door can pop out of the track. If the clients have children, we recommend an E-shaped track for better support. These are made wider than they use to be and are therefore easier to clean.

In general, sliding units work fine on tub enclosures, but the ones I've seen and used for shower doors were embarrassingly wobbly and flimsy because of the extra height involved.

Shower Remodels

When remodeling an existing shower, we're often starting with a space that looks like a cave. Tiled shower stalls typically have a low, 7-foot ceiling, and the entrances are even lower. The door jambs are only 24 inches wide, and the doors themselves are made of translucent glass.

When we are asked to repair or remodel such a shower, we typically open it up as much as possible. We remove the low ceiling and widen the 24-inch opening by removing the jambs, plus we use clear glass for the new door (Figure 4).

Where possible, we remove one of the tile walls and replace it with clear glass. We have been quite successful with this approach. The bathroom visually extends into the shower, which creates a sense of extra space in what is typically a small room. Remodeling a shower this way can be economical since it uses less trim tile — the most expensive part of tile work — than an older style enclosure. Also, there is often less field tile to install.

If the shower is a walled-in, "neo-angle" unit (a square with one corner cut off), we remove both walls to open up the room (Figure 5). If the lav abuts to the shower wall, we leave a short wall in place between it and the shower, and build a tiled vanity there. The wall can be the same height as the counter. But if

you make it 4 inches higher, you can create an end splash. In either case, the shower and counter will have the same tile. We then install a shorter fixed-glass panel on top of the short wall as a part of the enclosure.

Built-In Features

Probably the most popular built-in feature is a soap and shampoo niche. We find out where the homeowner wants to put these niches, but we suggest they use existing stud openings to avoid special framing.

When framing the niche, remember that the finished opening will be at least 2 inches smaller in each direction, to account for the thickness of the mortar and tile. Also, we measure the homeowners' soap and shampoo containers to be certain they will fit. There is quite a bit of layout time involved, and with the trim work for the tile setter, the niche can cost as much as $200 to complete.

Benches are also popular (Figure 6). But make sure you have the space to make them big enough to comfortably sit on. Also, it is important that you build the framed bench to be completely watertight. We always use a shower-pan membrane, such as Chloraloy (Noble Co., 614 Monroe St., Grand Haven, MI 49417; 616/842-7844) under the tile.

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. Choose your installer carefully — some of them move like gorillas and others are a little gentler. We prefer the latter on our job sites.

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 tubs or shower pans are straightforward; tile is a little trickier. Be sure to use a sharp carbide bit and a low-impact hammer drill, or better yet, a rotary-only

COURTESY OF DUSCHQUEEN

Figure 3. *For a unique look, glass shower panels can be custom-cut at the factory, but such installations require precise field measurements.*

COURTESY OF ALUMAX

Figure 4. *When remodeling a shower, the author often removes the low ceiling and narrow jambs, and installs clear glass to create a modern, open look.*

Tips From an Installer

by Steve Woodward

As a professional glazier, I've installed lots of glass tub and shower enclosures. The company I work for, Able Paint & Glass, both sells and installs the enclosure kits. Because we do them all the time, we can give builders competitive pricing on installations. But if a builder wants to do the job himself, we'll sell him the unit and give him good installation advice based on our experience. Here's a brief rundown of the steps involved.

Measure carefully. A top-quality installation starts with accurate measuring of the space where the enclosure will fit. One key thing to look for is how plumb the walls are. In a two-sided unit, if the bathroom walls are too far out of plumb, the error will be compounded at the front corner of the glass enclosure. Also, if the enclosure panels are too far out of square, the door reveals may look sloppy. For steam enclosures, like the one shown here, don't forget to measure the distance to the ceiling.

Fortunately, most enclosure kits allow for some inconsistencies in the walls. If the walls are 1/4 inch or so out of square, you can easily hide this by making adjustments in the two-piece extrusions that hold the glass at the walls. You can even special-order "expander" extrusions that will cover for walls up to 3/4-inch out of square. Beyond that, though, it's best to make a template of the space and have the glass panels custom-cut at the factory. This is more expensive, but it's the only way to ensure a professional looking job — short of reframing.

High-quality extrusions, like these by Century Shower Door, fit snugly together, allowing the installer to friction-assemble the unit (A) and adjust the reveals where necessary (B). After carefully drilling holes in the metal components (C), the author screws the unit together (D).

Work carefully. Once you get the kit, proceed slowly with the installation — you only get one chance. I start by mounting the sill tracks. These get laid in a bed of sealant. The kit comes with a toothpaste tube of sealant, but I throw this away and use a GE tub and tile sealant that comes in a caulk tube.

Next I install the wall tracks, which come in two pieces. One piece mounts directly to the wall with screws. The second piece snaps snugly onto the first and allows for adjustment before final screwing into place. The wall tracks don't require sealant — the exposed joints at the tile get caulked at the end of the installation.

It's important to use only high-quality carbide masonry bits when drilling into tile — a chipped or cracked tile is expensive to replace. A cordless drill works fine.

Trial run. Once the wall tracks are in place, I friction-assemble the metal extrusions and slide the glass panels into the tracks. Nothing is screwed together yet — first I test the fit of the glass panels and door. I make adjustments as necessary with the expander strips at the walls to get everything plumb. Then I adjust the reveal at the door using 1/4-inch neoprene setting blocks as spacers. When everything fits the way it should, I mark the necessary screw holes with a punch, then take everything apart to drill the holes in the metal. I predrill just enough screws to lock things into place, then drill the rest after reassembling the unit. Working this way means I'm basically putting the unit together twice, but it ensures a nice-looking end result.

It's especially important to drill the right size hole for the metal screws. If you drill the hole too small you may snap the heads off — a real pain to correct.

Finishing up. After all the pieces are screwed together, the final step is to silicone caulk all the exposed joints between tile and metal. The installation pictured here took about six hours from start to finish.

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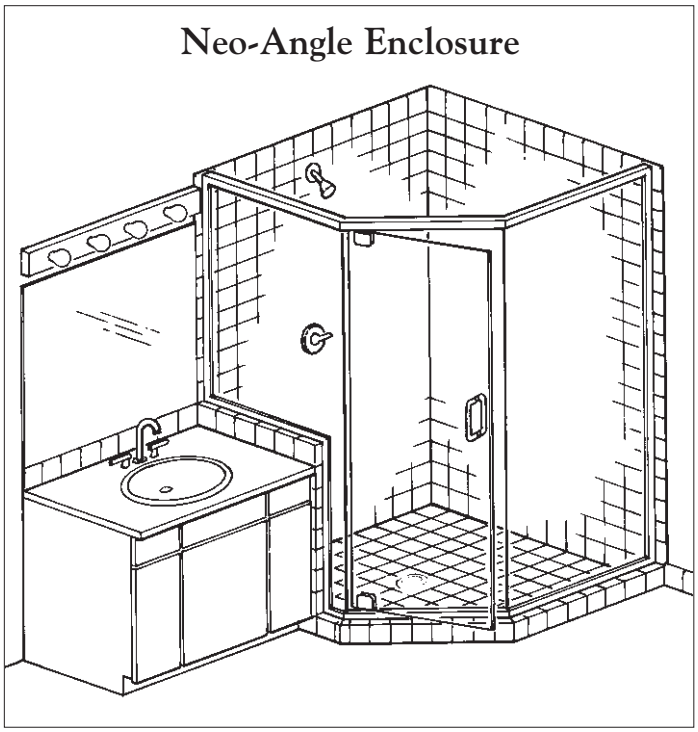

Figure 5. *In remodels where the vanity abuts a shower, the author often leaves a short wall in place and tiles it. This works nicely with a neo-angle unit, as shown.*

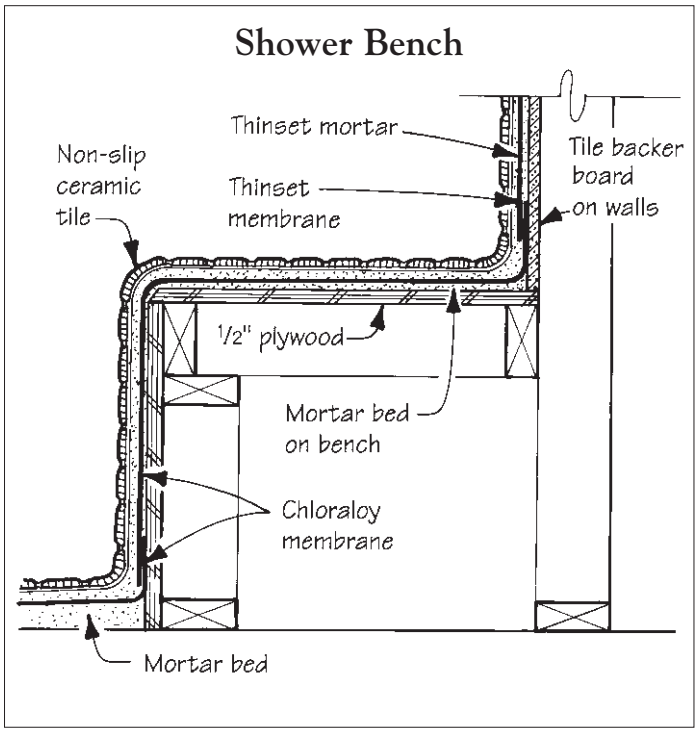

Figure 6. *Where space is available, benches are a popular addition to a tile shower. The author uses tile membranes to ensure a durable, waterproof installation.*

drill, for drilling the tile. If any of the tile is loose, it's best to remove and reset it. And if the tile can't be replaced, it goes without saying that you'll want to send in your best people 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 installer uses GE Contractors 1000 Silicone or Sanitary White, which contains a mildew inhibitor.

Maintenance

Unfortunately, you don't get the sleek look of clear glass without some maintenance. When soap-laden water dries on clear glass, it leaves a film of soap. Regular cleaning with clean water and a squeegee are needed to keep it spotless. There are also 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 Lime-A-Way. The only caution is not to leave them on the metal for too long because they're acidic and can remove the finish. ■

Lynn Comeskey is a remodeling contractor who specializes in kitchens and baths. His firm, Mac & Lou Construction, is based in Palo Alto, Calif.

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