

# Ten Important Elements of a Good Bathroom

A little planning along with a thoughtful selection of fittings and fixtures can make all the difference

BY DAVID EDRINGTON

**I**t's one of the first rooms we see in the morning and one of the last rooms we see at night. It's certainly among the most private rooms in the house, and the finishes, fixtures and mechanical equipment required by even a simple bathroom place it among the most expensive real estate in the house. Given the intimate nature of bathrooms and the frequency with which they are used, I think their design and detailing should also impart a measure of emotional well-being to their users. In this spirit, I offer ten suggestions for making a good bathroom that can enhance some of your everyday experiences.

## 1. An entrance transition

Except for the so-called master bath, most bathrooms serve several users and need to be placed in a location central to these users, usually halfway between the private parts of the house and the more public parts. Don't have a bathroom with multiple-door access.

Instead, create an entrance with a space outside the door—maybe an alcove off the hallway that gives some privacy from the main rooms or circulation area and with a little room inside the door before reaching the bathroom fixtures (drawing right).

## 2. Roomlike proportions

Too many bathrooms are simply hallways with the fixtures lining one side of the hall. It is hard to make a pleasant room of that shape. First, a good room is roughly square or rectangular with length-to-width proportions not exceeding 2:1. In almost every good room, there is a clear central space, a center with smaller spaces like alcoves around the edges. A bathroom can be designed using these principles in miniature (drawing right). There can easily be a central space that contains the entry, with some elbow room for washing and drying off and

with alcoves around the edges for the toilet, the shower or the tub (photo facing page).

## 3. A good window

Natural light and a view to the outside are important in the bathroom. Our first understanding of the weather and the general look of the day comes in the window. Ideally, windows are on at least two sides of the room to provide even daylighting. If privacy is an issue, make multiple windows face a courtyard garden, perhaps with an outdoor shower. If you have room for only one window, place it where it illuminates the portion of the room that you see when you enter (photo p. 70).

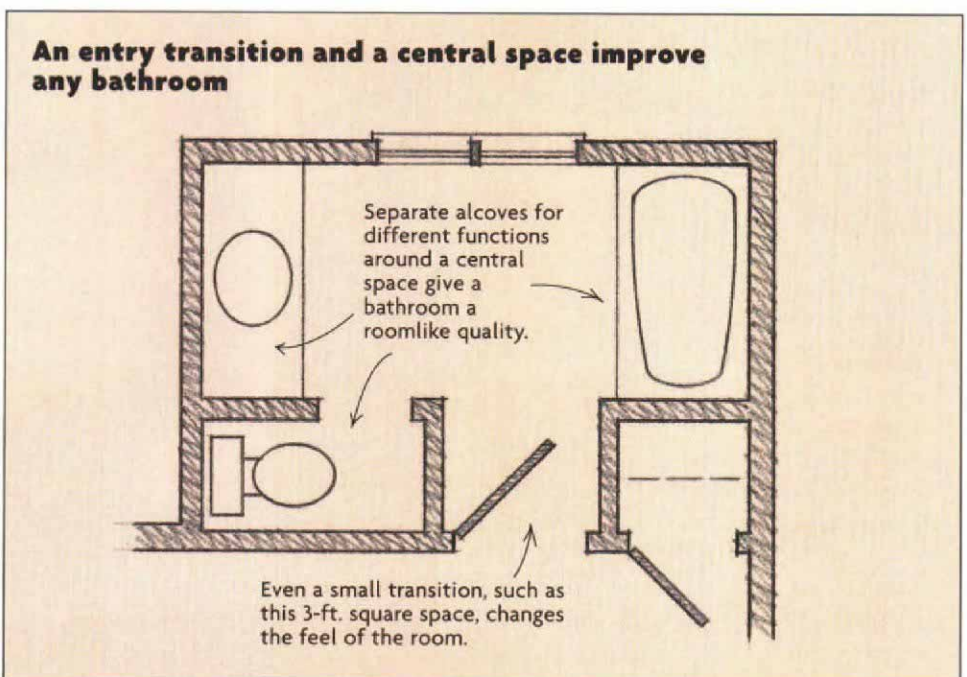
## 4. From the least intimate places to the most intimate places

Another principle that applies to residential design in general and to the bathroom in

miniature is "the intimacy gradient." Just as you locate the bedrooms the farthest from the front door, you should locate the most private part of the bathroom the greatest distance from the entry to the room (drawing and photo, p. 69). The most private part varies from family to family, with the toilet being the most private for some and the bath for others.

## 5. Borrowed views

In a small space such as a bathroom, it is difficult to get a direct view to the outside from each space. But it is possible to borrow the view across another space or another fixture. A shower is a good example. It needs to be enclosed with water-resistant materials. So a window in a shower with an exterior wall, particularly a beautiful wood window, is not an ideal candidate for part of a shower encl-





**Roomlike proportions add a calming touch to a bathroom. A bathtub alcove such as this one creates a sense of place in a bathroom that just can't be achieved in a bath that resembles a hallway.**

**Diagonal sight lines enlarge a bathroom. As seen from the shower, views across the tub and into the lavatory portion of this bathroom foster a sense of spaciousness.**



sure. There are a number of positions that the shower can take in the bathroom that will allow for a good view through a clear-glass shower door (photo facing page).

## 6. Pay attention to vertical and horizontal dimensions

Certain minimum clearances around bathroom fixtures are required by every building code. My own experience is that you need about 36 in. of elbow room at the lavatory to use it comfortably. Its counter is typically between 31 in. and 34 in. high. The rule: You want the water to run off your wrists, not your elbows. A double-lavatory arrangement is mostly ornamental unless it has 6 ft. of counter space.

A toilet compartment is tight at the code minimum of 30 in., about right at 36 in. and a waste of space after that. In fact, after 40 in., you lose touch with the walls on each side and the sense of enclosure they provide. Although the minimum dimension for a shower stall is 30 in., it must also have no less than 1,024 sq. in. of finished interior area. This amount is really

minimal, and I wouldn't recommend less than 36 in. square, or a 30-in. by 48-in. rectangular shower if you can find the room.

The standard length for a tub is 60 in., and many are 66 in. and 72 in. long. If you get a deep, rounded-back claw-foot type, you can easily be comfortable with a 54-in. or a 56-in. long tub unless you're taller than 6 ft. I recommend, however, that you make an honest evaluation of whether you really ever use a tub and consider instead putting money into a nice shower.

Just as any good room benefits from a variety of ceiling heights, so does a good bathroom. Make the ceiling highest in the center, and lower it around tubs, showers, toilet alcoves and window seats. The chart (left) lists common fixture heights.

### Common heights of bathroom fixtures and fittings above the floor

Shower head	6 ft. 7 in.
Shower rod	6 ft. 6 in.
Toilet-paper holder	24 in.
Towel bars	48 in.
Toothbrush holder	48 in.
Soap holder	48 in.
Tub-deck height	18 in.

Any small room like a bathroom can benefit from the visually expansive effects of horizontal lines. This is often seen in traditional bathrooms as a strong cap on top of wainscoting. The lower part of the wall is done in a water-resistant finish such as tile or enamel paint and is capped by a strong horizontal

band with plaster or wallpaper above. This horizontal band combined with a baseboard and sometimes a crown molding at the ceiling adds horizontal lines that visually enlarge the perimeter of the room.

Two vertical dimensions are often the subject of discussion and sometimes construction changes. The first is the height of sconces. I prefer a framed mirror above a lavatory with sconces on the side because they give the best light to the sides of the face and fewer shadows in the facial recesses than light from above the face. The height I use for sconces is the height of my client.

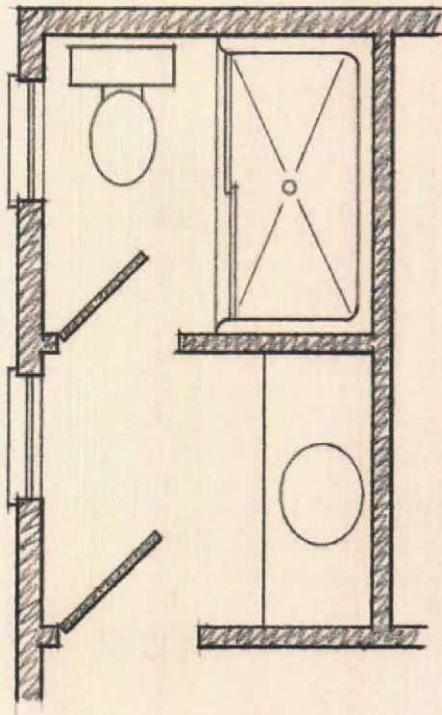
The last vertical dimension is one of those little details that gives me problems near the end of a project: the water supply to the toilet. Place it high enough, including the escutcheon, to be out of the baseboard. I've found that 10½ in. is enough to clear all but the tallest baseboards and still leaves room for a flexible connection to the toilet tank.

## 7. Water-resistant finishes

There is probably nothing nicer than ceramic tile in a bathroom. Properly installed, it is a cleanable, water-resistant surface for floors, walls and shower enclosures. If a whole wall need not be water resistant, ceramic tile can also make a beautiful wainscot. On floors, it can be colder on the feet than other materi-

### The intimacy gradient applied to the bathroom

The most intimate portions of a bathroom should be the farthest from the door. In a small bath such as this one, compartments with doors do the trick.



**Bathrooms need windows. For ventilation and a glimpse of the world at first light, a good window is a must in a bathroom. Try to place it in a position that you walk toward in the room.**



als, such as wood, but a simple area rug or a more expensive heat pad under the tile can easily solve this objection. Too much tile can change the acoustics of a room, and you should keep to softer materials on the ceiling and a portion of the walls (or have lots of bars for big fluffy towels).

I have used wood floors in many bathrooms, and with today's tough floor varnishes, they can hold up well to a modest amount of water as long as it is not allowed to sit on the floor for a long period of time. It seems a little uncomfortable putting a toilet directly on a wood floor, so I use a transition pad made of a scrap of granite or marble for toilets on wood floors (top photo).

Another attractive, traditional bathroom-floor material is linoleum. It is nothing like today's vinyl plastics. Again, proper installation is important for resistance to water.

The only wall surfaces that truly need to be water resistant are the shower walls. There are a variety of useful materials ranging from one-piece molded enclosures to wall-size sheets of materials to individual pieces such as tile. In every instance, installation is critical, particularly at joints, to the ultimate success of the material.

It is helpful to have an easily cleanable surface around the lavatory on the countertop and on the walls immediately around the sink. Ceramic tile is a good choice. Natural stone, polished and sealed concrete, and other nonabsorbent materials work well on both surfaces. On walls, a good-quality enamel paint on smooth plaster makes a cleanable, water-resistant finish.

## 8. Fixtures that really work

To me, good-quality bathroom fixtures mean enameled cast iron for tubs and china for lavatories. I recently remodeled the two bathrooms in my 1929 cottage. After 70 years, it was finally time to replace the original enameled cast-iron tubs. Cast iron and china are still so commonly used that the price difference between these quality fixtures and bargain fixtures is modest.

Good fittings such as faucets and tub/shower valves, however, are noticeably more expensive than run-of-the-mill fittings, sometimes as much as triple the cost. I use them, however, whenever I can afford to put them in the budget because over their life, they are still a bargain when compared with average fittings that last a far shorter period of time. I also have to admit that there is no other faucet that gives me the pleasure of use as a classic Chicago (847-803-5000) or Rudge (Waterworks; 800-927-2120) faucet. For finishes, stay with tried-and-true nickel

or chrome without the plastic coatings. Someone's going to have these faucets in 50 years if you make the correct choice (center photo).

One piece of equipment that has improved during the past few years is the exhaust fan. They are clearly quieter than five years ago. Companies such as Broan and NuTone (800-548-0790) have ceiling-mounted, barely audible exhaust fans. Speaking of noise reduction, the newer "coexcel" ABS plastic drain pipe seems to be quieter than the older ABS. But nothing can replace cast iron for quietness in a drain pipe that comes down the wall of a first-floor living space. The slight increase in material cost is more than offset in the long run of the life of the house.

## 9. Important accessories

Light fixtures, towel bars, medicine cabinets, furniture, switch-plate covers, shower doors—there are hundreds of opportunities to make decisions about these kinds of details in a bathroom. My advice: Keep them simple and straightforward. Buy good quality that will last a long time. Keep them related to each other in design and materials, except for the occasional humorous surprise. Look for timeless qualities. Choose things that you want to live with. There is no reason you can't enjoy even the most mundane item in your bathroom (bottom photo).

## 10. The lost art of bathing

The previous suggestions will help you to make the ordinary bathroom that you use several times each day a pleasant, enjoyable place. Sometimes, though, you want to go beyond that and experience the real pleasure of bathing. The deep relaxation of hot water, the peaceful pleasure of bathing with family or friends, and the therapy of quiet immersion in water are all aspects of the art of bathing. The oversize master bathrooms in the pseudomansions of the late-20th century only hint at this fundamental human need. The essence has been lost in the cheap materials typically used to build them.

To re-create this experience requires a deep, profound examination of the history and tradition of bathing and the environment needed to support it fully. My sense is that the quality of the room as a space—with places to sit around the perimeter, with good natural light and with good connections to a private outdoor space—are paramount to creating this experience. □

David Edrington is an architect in Eugene, Oregon. Many of these principles are elaborations on guidelines published in *A Pattern Language* by Christopher Alexander. Photos by Charles Miller.



**Use fixtures and accessories that are simple and substantial.** To protect a wood floor from moisture damage, the toilet (top photo) sits on a marble slab. No-frills, high-quality plumbing fixtures such as this Chicago faucet (center photo) will last for generations. Simple chrome towel rings (photo above) and stainless-steel cover plates are also good choices.