

Glass-Block Shower on a Curve

This shower-stall alternative lets in the light, offers privacy, and makes a small space feel roomy

BY TOM MEEHAN

It wasn't long ago that shower stalls were made to serve one purpose: getting you clean. Color choice was the only real aesthetic concern; size and shape were considered matters of utility and efficiency.

Now, people think of showering as an important part of the day, both physically and mentally. The small dungeons of the past are being replaced with functional works of art. To this end, I think that glass block blows away most other shower options.

Glass-block showers are a great way to let in some light and to provide a sense of openness and freedom, even in a small bathroom. Glass blocks offer tremendous design flexibility, yet the subtle visual distortion of glass affords full privacy. No more dungeons.

New accessories make for an easier installation

If you wanted a glass-block shower a decade ago, I would have told you to find a mason—and for good reason. Unless you have experience, glass blocks are hard to keep straight and plumb. The best that beginners could hope to accomplish was a couple of courses at a time, and they would likely still struggle to keep the work in line until the mortar set up.



With just one change in design from a basic wall supported on all four sides—whether it's the addition of a curved surface, a wall that stops short of the ceiling, or one that is unsupported on one end—the project becomes more complicated. Some projects, such as the shower that's featured here, combine all these complications and then some.

Now, though, glass-block manufacturers like Pittsburgh Corning (www.pittsburghcorning.com) are taking a bit of the fear out of the process by offering helpful installation accessories. The cornerstone of these accessories is the glass-block spacer. These pieces of plastic lock each block in place as it is installed, and are left in place and covered by grout. More work can be done at one time, and the blocks don't shift or slip out of place as easily.

Don't get me wrong: Glass-block installations still take patience and careful attention to detail. But I hope these installation accessories combined with my hard-learned installation tricks will help to ease what was once a much-steeper learning curve.

Tom Meehan is the author of *Working With Tile* (The Taunton Press, 2005). Photos by Justin Fink, except where noted.

Waterproofed and pitched for drainage. Before tiling the concrete-block curb, I set a waterproofing membrane in a layer of thinset. Because the curb will be visible, I cap it with marble pitched slightly toward the inside of the shower for proper drainage. To help get the marble overhang right, I tile the sides of the curb before capping it.



BUILD THE CURB WITH CONCRETE BLOCKS

A straight shower curb can be built by doubling up 2x4s and nailing them to the floor, but curves are more work. For curves, I arrange a row of glass blocks on the floor into the desired shape, trace around them, cut concrete landscape blocks to fit the shape, and set them in thinset. Next, I float a mortar bed for the shower floor and cover the curb with a waterproof membrane. Square shower pans can be waterproofed with a one-piece vinyl membrane like Chloraloy (www.noblecompany.com), but I like the Kerdi system (www.schluter.com; photo right) for curved pans because the membrane can be cut into wedges and overlapped where needed to get around tight curves.



Preformed Kerdi corners and waterproofing strip



Finish the foundation. Once the concrete blocks and mortar bed have set up, the curb is waterproofed. I like to wrap the curb in preparation for the 2-in. tiles used to cover the sides and the marble caps that go on top. Because the Kerdi membrane is easily damaged, I don't set it on the shower floor until I'm done installing the glass blocks.



Cut the curves. I cut the curved cap pieces on a Gemini Revolution tile saw (www.geminisaw.com) because its 10-in.-dia. ring-shaped diamond blade allows me to follow a tighter inside or outside curve than I could cut with a standard wet saw. A standard wet saw can also be used, but you have to make a series of straight cuts up to the curved line, then remove the waste with tile nippers.



Prep the curb to hold the blocks. After the marble cap has been installed and has set up for a day, I dry-lay the glass blocks in place to make sure they line up properly. Once I'm happy with the layout, I trace the outline of the blocks with a pencil. Don't use a permanent marker here because the marks could be visible once the glass is installed. After the layout is traced onto the marble cap, I scarify the cap with a diamond blade in an angle grinder. This allows the thinset to lock into the surface of the marble cap.

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Visit our home page to see video of Tom Meehan cutting a curve in a piece of marble and rounding over the edges with a sander/polisher.

TAKE EXTRA TIME TO SET THE FIRST COURSE

The first course of glass blocks sets the stage for the entire installation. Take as much time as necessary to get the blocks strongly adhered and perfectly level in both directions before moving on.



Sturdy and level. I skim-coat the curb with thinset, then set the first course of blocks on a thick bed of glass-block mortar. The thinset and mortar lock together as they dry. Check each block for level, and shim with tile spacers where necessary. It's better to use too much mortar and have it squeeze out than to use too little and risk voids.



Use glass-block spacers. They establish a consistent 1/4-in. grout joint and lock the blocks in place. There are two different spacers for this project. One is for straight runs; the other is for curves. Be careful, though. Both spacers look similar, and they are easy to install upside down accidentally.



Mix the mortar stiff

Glass blocks must be installed using a special glass-block mortar; don't be tempted to use any other products in a pinch. The lime in this powdered mortar mix is hazardous to your health if inhaled, so wear a respirator. I start with a 50-lb. bag of glass-block mortar in a small plastic mortar tub; then I slowly add water as I work the mortar with a small mixing hoe. The mortar should be fairly stiff; too loose, and the blocks will slide. To be on the safe side, I like to get the mortar close to the right consistency, then dribble a little water at a time into the tub using a grouting sponge.

REINFORCE AS YOU RISE

For this job, I had an entry opening on one end of the shower wall, and the glass blocks also stopped short of the ceiling. Without using the manufacturer's panel anchors, rebar, and block spacers, the wall would have been pretty shaky. Take the time to reinforce the wall where recommended.

Panel anchors



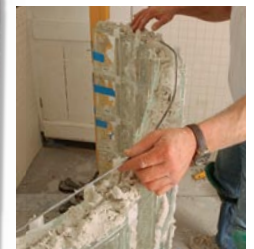
Sixteen-in.-long stainless-steel panel anchors tie the glass blocks to the walls. The anchors must be bent into an L-shape—the short leg should be about 4 in. long—and installed every 2 vertical ft.

Expansion strips



Wherever glass blocks will abut a wall, a ceiling, or a header, a 1/4-in. poly expansion strip must be installed. Lap the strip over the stainless-steel panel anchor. There's no need for expansion strips under the first course.

Joint reinforcement



I place panel-reinforcement strips in a bed of glass-block mortar at the same horizontal joints that require panel anchors. For curved walls, I cut the strips in half, bend them to the desired radius, and lay the halves side by side.

Product photos this page: Krysta S. Doerfler

CLEAN, GROUT, AND CLEAN AGAIN

The final stages of a glass-block installation are always the most gratifying. Remove excess mortar, pack the joints with grout, and clean the glass to a glistening shine.



Twist off the tabs and clean. The spacer tabs can be taken off after the blocks have set up a bit, usually about two or three hours. Don't wait until the cement cures, though. The excess mortar behind the tabs must be cleaned off before it hardens completely.



Always use sanded grout. The strongest choice for finishing large joints is sanded grout. Pack the grout into the joints, and scrape off the excess before wiping the entire surface with a sponge and cool, clean water.



Remove the haze. After the grout has firmed up a bit, remove the grout haze by firmly buffing the blocks with a cotton cloth.



A pair of levels keeps things in line

Glass blocks around door openings often shift during assembly. To keep things in line, I clamp a long level to the face of the glass blocks, then clamp a short level to the long level so that I can check for plumb in two directions as I work. As new blocks are placed, I fasten them to the levels with painter's tape to keep them from shifting.

