

Half-Baths Full of Function

Design these small spaces
to be as practical as they are beautiful

BY LYNN HOPKINS

Much of my work involves renovating and reconfiguring houses in New England, many of which date back to a time when half-baths were nonexistent. If a house did have an original half-bath, it was likely located in a small shed in the backyard—not exactly the kind of space contemporary homeowners are looking to renovate. Updating these houses can be challenging, and integrating a half-bath can take some creative thinking. Designing a half-bath—often called a powder room here in New England—usually involves figuring out how to shoehorn it into an existing plan. Whether in a remodel or a new home, you have to consider who will use it even before you determine its location.

Create privacy in public spaces

The original intent of the half-bathroom was to create a facility for guests. Traditionally, these bathrooms were located near the entry foyer to keep guests from wandering too deeply into the private areas of a home. The same reasoning holds true for modern-day half-baths.

With this in mind, determining an appropriate location can be challenging, because a half-bath has two requirements that can be in conflict. First, it should be convenient to the social spaces of the house—the living, dining, family, and kitchen areas. It also must provide sufficient privacy. Locating a powder room off an entry, hall, or other circulation space is ideal. Entering and exiting a half-bath that opens into a room where people are eating, cooking, or having a conversation is awkward at best and embarrassing at worst.

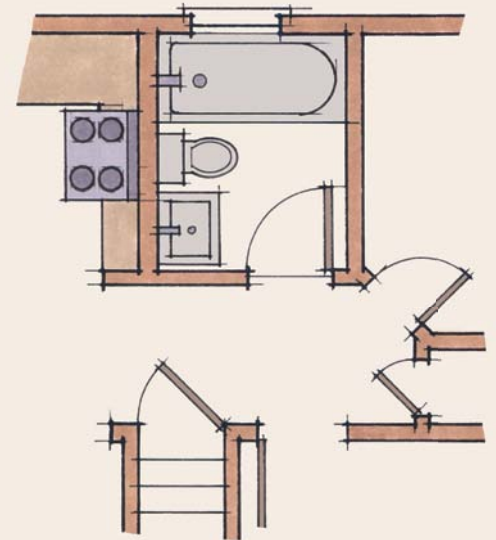
Finding space in the desired location can be a challenge, but because this room is generally not used for an extended period of time or a variety of tasks, the area requirements can be minimal. I have tucked powder rooms into closets, hidden them under stairs, and squeezed them out of adjacent rooms. When a small house increases substantially in size, a full bath may no longer be needed in its current location and can be replaced with a smaller



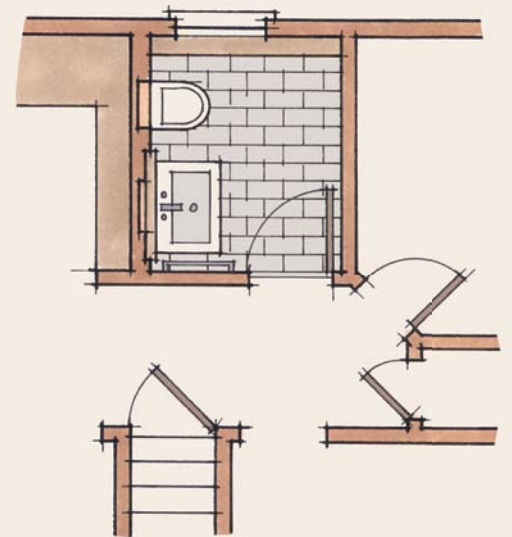
RETHINKING A FULL BATH



Fine finishes. Because the shower and tub were removed, moisture is no longer a problem in the bath, so vertical-grain Douglas-fir-clad walls could be installed without concern. Glass tile adds durability and reduces maintenance in the wet area around the sink. The floor is made of slate tiles.



Before The minimal-size full bath was necessary when the house was a little Cape with two small bedrooms on the first floor. As the house grew, however, additional bathrooms elsewhere made the tub in the original bath unnecessary. The window in the shower was problematic, too.



After Eliminating the tub freed the room to take advantage of the window. Condensation and moisture issues were eliminated, expanding the range of finish options drastically. A two-fixture bath configuration eliminates much of the shampoo/shaving/makeup clutter that accompanies a full bath, effortlessly keeping the room tidy and ready for guests.

0 2 4 8 ft.

and/or more gracious half-bath. The right location often trumps room size.

Make it compact

Because this type of bathroom is going to be used more for hand washing than bathing and grooming, the sink doesn't need to be very large, and the towels can be smaller. Wall-hung or pedestal sinks require only a small area and result in a more spacious-feeling room. Storage requirements in a powder room aren't the same as in a full bath, either. Hand soap, a bottle of aspirin, a few spare rolls of toilet paper, and some bandages are often all that need to be accommodated, not the voluminous range of toiletries found in a full bath. These items often can be placed in compact wall cabinets, on shelves, or in canisters. Recessed or built-in storage can steal a few valuable inches of space from the walls without enlarging the footprint of the room.

A wall-hung toilet is another way to save space; because the tank is concealed within the wall, the fixture doesn't project too far into the room. Servicing the fixture occurs through the actuator plate and doesn't require dismantling the wall.

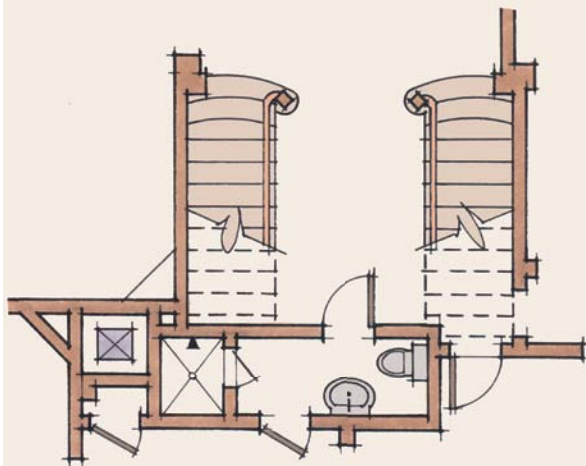
Still another space-saving trick is to tuck a toilet below a sloped ceiling, such as the underside of a stair, as long as the ceiling height in front of the toilet is adequate to meet code. Section R305 of the IRC requires a minimum of 6½ ft. of ceiling height at the centerline of the 21-in. clearance area in front of the toilet—that is, 10½ in. beyond the toilet's front edge.

Small still can be custom

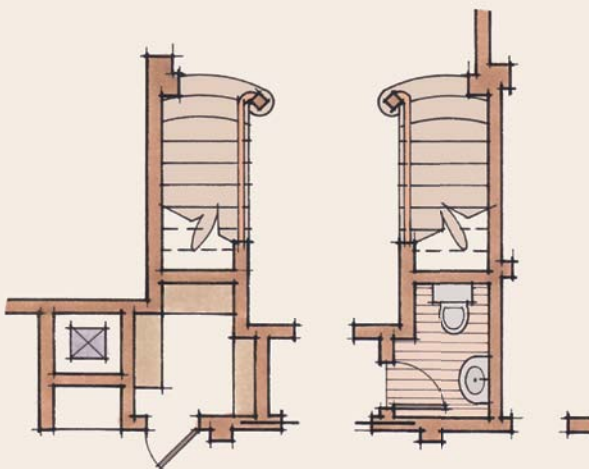
Because its spatial demands are not as great as those of a full bathroom, a powder room can have greater finish options and custom details. Humidity and moisture levels are less than those in a full bath, so wood and all kinds of wallpaper can be practical choices for wall finishes. Moisture-proof materials such as tile are still the best choices where water spray is inevitable, such as around the sink area. Another advantage of a powder room is that even the most expensive finishes may be affordable because the space is so small. Splurging for that beautiful but costly tile won't feel quite so excessive. □

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Photos by Rob Yagid.

TUCKING A BATH UNDER THE STAIRS



Before The house has a wonderful double staircase that is visible as soon as you walk through the front door. At some point, previous owners installed a powder room behind the small door centered below the stair landing. Not only was this an overly public location for such a private room, but it also cut the kitchen and family room off from the rest of the house.



After Moving the powder room to the area under one of the stairs made it possible to open up a sightline through the house to the back garden. Tying the expanded family room and reconfigured kitchen in with the public front rooms of the house dramatically improves the flow between all rooms. The powder room is still centrally located but is discreetly accessed off a small vestibule.

0 2 4 8 ft.





Substair solution. Tucking the half-bath under a set of stairs makes efficient use of otherwise useless square footage. The toilet is ideally located beneath the sloped portion of this small space.



Bare essentials. A small vanity holds all that is required of this half-bath, which is located near the front entry and is used predominantly by guests. To elevate the aesthetic of the small space, the homeowners chose this bronze 17-in. undermount sink by Kohler.

