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Tap imagination when remodeling the bathroom

Bathrooms have come full circle. Once upon a time, luxury bathrooms were reserved only for the rich. Royalty lounged in marble bathtubs adorned with gold-plated fixtures, leaving the peasants to bathe in a nearby stream.

Centuries later came the era of the drab bathroom. Everybody had one that looked the same — white porcelain tubs and tile, rusty fixtures and plain curtains.

Finally, the chic bathroom is back in style. And the good news is there's something to fit every price range — whether it's the \$25,500 Sensorium bathing pool and Ambiance system that controls water temperature and depth, music, whirlpool jets and lighting and gives a bird's-eye view to the front door via a small TV surveillance screen, or a \$6 colored ceramic pull to brighten a bathroom drawer.

Many Americans are plunging into improvements for what was once the most neglected room in the house. This year, more Americans will remodel their bathrooms than ever before, spending about \$8.6 billion in the process, according to recent industry surveys.

The goal of many bath remodelings is either a luxuriously large new space, or the more efficient use of every square inch of the present bath. New baths are being designed with generous plays of light and color — gleaming surfaces, bolder color schemes and glamorous accessories.

If space and budget allow, many home owners desire the added amenities of skylights, sound systems, exercise areas, dressing rooms, whirlpools, vanities, oversized tubs and lots of ceramic tile.

Tubs are larger and more comfortable, gold-plated faucets abound again and saunas, steam rooms, bidets and even fireplaces are commonplace. The bathroom has become a haven in which to relax, unwind and escape the busy world. Function provides the blueprint, but graciousness and comfort are the end result.

If you're toying with the idea of remodeling your own bathroom, dive in, say designers. Dollar for dollar, bathroom remodeling recoups the investment at the time of the sale. However, a word of advice from designer Lyn Peterson: "Don't outdo the neighborhood. If you live on a street with \$80,000 homes, don't build a bathroom for \$50,000 and expect the house to automatically bring \$130,000 at resale."

As for actual design, experts at Motif Designs recommend starting with gray or another neutral color for the fixtures and floors because the bath-

room will stay fashionable longer. Add color through decorations like shower curtains, towels, rugs and drawer pulls, which can be replaced and updated periodically. Good bathrooms are designed to remain functional for 40 years, Peterson says.

Patterned vinyl wall coverings can instantly personalize a bathroom. Be sure to prep the walls correctly for proper application and staying power. Motif Design experts like floor-to-ceiling tile because of practicality and longevity as well as the European aura it can create.

Lights should be positioned on opposite sides of the mirror for grooming needs. Natural light is wonderful for applying makeup, so adding sunlight through a skylight where possible or adding a window is an improvement. Sunlight enriches the look of the room while providing ventilation and humidity control.

Converting all bathroom fixtures to fluorescent will improve a bathroom's lighting quality and reduce electricity costs, according to Jim Jensen, a technical lighting specialist for General Electric.

Some families have been able to use adjacent bedroom space or actually add another story to provide for the ultimate master bath, says Bill Waikart, president of Home Masters Ltd., a north Virginia firm specializing in kitchens and baths. Most bath remodeling jobs concentrate on giving the illusion of space and comfort.

Even "extras" need attention. Exhaust fans with heaters, washerless faucets and exotic lighting fixtures combine with towel bars and accessories of chrome, fashion-colored plastic, acrylic or polished brass to make the details striking. Shower curtains are not just functional — they're country in billows of cloth, city-style in slick plastic.

Personalize your bathroom by hanging a small, distinctive clock, or arranging a vase of fragrant flowers or a basket of potpourri says Glamour magazine. Hang framed snapshots or a poster, sealed to protect against water damage. To soothe frazzled nerves, add candles. One San Diego home owner even used her bathroom to display her prized sculpture collection.

Every bathroom must provide privacy. Cover windows with shutters, or trade regular panes for frosted or stained glass. Layers of glass blocks can serve as windows or even walls.

Large or small, a creative bathroom could easily become the most attractive room in the house . . . a room that no home owner would hide.

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