

# Big Ideas for Small Bathrooms

by Jeanne Vanecko

The world has seen too many bathrooms of the same mold. I refer to what has become the standard for small to medium-sized bathrooms: a tub along a 5-foot wall, a toilet, and a 30- to 48-inch vanity topped with a small, recessed, mirrored medicine cabinet illuminated by a strip of round theatrical lights. It's the epitome of blandness—all function, no inspiration. But are there alternatives when all these elements are necessary and space inhibits a more imaginative design?

I will describe some options I have found in trying to design bathrooms that are functional yet stylistically responsive and interesting, while accepting the condition of limited space.

A primary problem in the standard bathroom I've described is the lavatory/vanity unit, or sink area: the graceless, boxy vanity, the obligatory mirrored medicine cabinet, and the functional but unprepossessing lighting fixture.

## The Vanity

If a bathroom is very small, I look first for a lavatory arrangement that will open the room as much as possible. Pedestal sinks do this well. They expose more of the floor, maintaining the maximum dimensions of the room visually. Pedestal sinks now come in so many sizes, shapes, and colors that one can become the room's visual focal point. There are also variations on the pedestal sink that preserve the same degree of visual openness while creating other stylistic possibilities. In two recent projects in an historic city

district, for example, I wanted to respond to the classical elements of the apartments. This purpose was best served by designing my own pedestal sinks.

In the first case, we wanted the appearance of an elegant turn-of-the-century black-and-white townhouse bathroom. The client wanted two sinks, some countertop space, and maximum medicine cabinet space. As floor space was extremely limited, I designed a 42x21-inch freestanding white marble top containing two 17-inch-wide white undermount sinks (see Figure 1). The 3/4-inch top was supported by 11/2-inch polished chrome legs and horizontal bars; the bars both stabilized the unit and provided hand-towel racks. To add character, we beveled the cut-out around the sinks, a detail that made the 3/4-inch slab appear to have more dimension.

I solved the issue of counter space (there being little space left on a 48-inch top with two 17-inch sinks) by designing a 5-inch-deep marble shelf running the length of the top. This shelf was set into a 12-inch-high, 3/4-inch-thick marble backsplash. It looked very much like an old marble washstand. Resting on top of the marble section was a custom-made, framed, double-mirrored, recessed medicine cabinet (each section measured 24 inches high by 22 inches wide) with a stationary top section for mounting two 250-watt halogen lights (see Figure 1). I used a black Kock & Lowy "Spats" light fixture. The Spats is a useful fixture in this geographical area because of its compactness, its

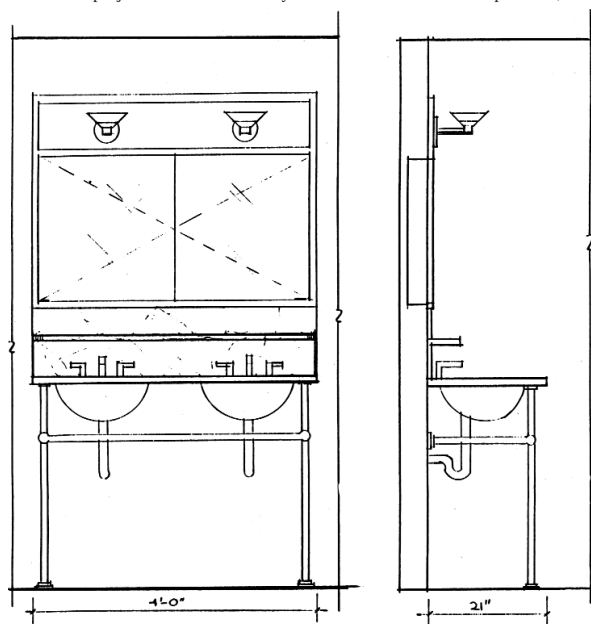


Figure 1. The open vanity leaves the floor area visually clear, while the double sink makes good use of limited counter space. The 3/4-inch marble is supported by chrome legs and horizontal bars, which double as towel racks. The marble shelf running over the faucets provides valuable extra counter space.

Figure 2. Where storage requirements are considerable but space is tight, an extra cabinet over the toilet can replace the more common cabinet beneath the sink, preserving a sense of openness.

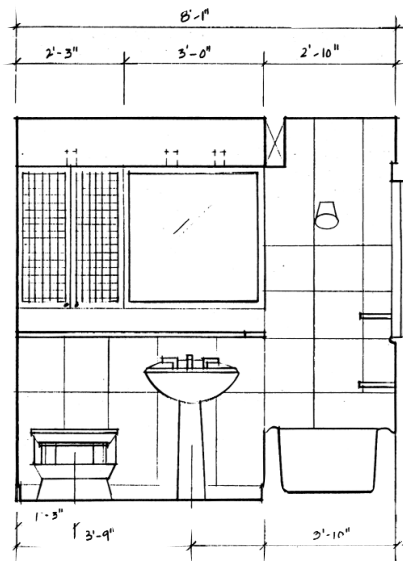
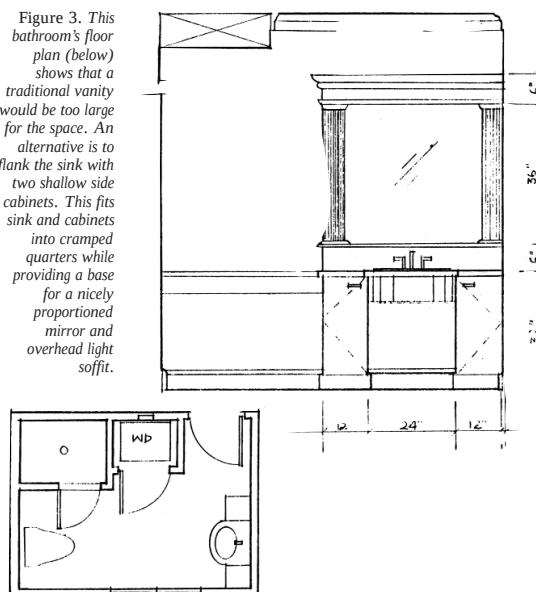


Figure 3. This bathroom's floor plan (below) shows that a traditional vanity would be too large for the space. An alternative is to flank the sink with two shallow side cabinets. This fits sink and cabinets into cramped quarters while providing a base for a nicely proportioned mirror and overhead light soffit.



high light output, and its classical simplicity. The mirror's frame was painted black and the section on which the lights were mounted was painted white.

The marble pedestal for the second apartment was more elaborate, as it had to establish a strong focal point for a room with even tighter space constraints. The space allocated for the toilet and lavatory was 4 feet 6 inches, which left me with a maximum of 2 feet for a freestanding lavatory.

The governing design concept for this room was that of a grand hotel bathroom. I wanted elegant but sensual sparseness and a feeling of airy openness. The sink I designed has a 3/4-inch marble top with a shaped edge and a 7-inch skirt on three sides. This is supported by 3/4-inch square iron legs with 3/4-inch iron diagonal crosspieces. The delicately veined Italian marble moves from creamy beige tones into blushing mauves. The iron supports are painted a varicolored green that resembles aged bronze.

In this bathroom as in the first, counter space is provided by a 7-inch-deep shelf above a 7 1/2-inch high backsplash. The edge detail on this shelf is the same as that on the countertop and establishes a chair-rail-height line that is picked up by wainscoting made of 3/8-inch-thick 12x12-inch marble tiles matching the lavatory; the floor and shower are tiled with the same material. The shower stall, which is 5 feet by 3 feet, has clear glass sliding doors framed with solid brass glazed to match the painted green supports on the sink. Ventilation for the shower comes through ornamental grill work that fills the space between the sliding doors and the ceiling and which repeats the ornamental pattern of crosspieces below the sink.

## The Question of Storage

Whenever one uses a pedestal sink instead of a vanity cabinet, one must address the issue of storage. Surface-mounted shelves above a pedestal offer one solution; a continuous 5-

inch-deep shelf created by building the lower half of the wall out behind a pedestal sink is another. Alternative storage spaces can be created in a number of ways, but it's important to preserve the balance and unity of detail without compromising the openness created by using the pedestal sink in the first place.

Circumstances are all-determining. For example, the first apartment's bathroom had a large storage closet that housed linens and cleaning materials. In the case of the second bathroom, the bathroom was a secondary bathroom, and linens and cleaning materials were stored in a nearby hallway closet.

If the preliminary bathroom is very small, storage needs invariably will exceed the room of even a large medicine cabinet. One remedy I recently used was to extend the shelf over the pedestal sink over the toilet, and place a 7-inch-deep cabinet above the toilet as well (see Figure 2). In most cases this type of cabinet can be finished off with a soffit above, which can extend back across the sink area and provide positions for several recessed lights.

#### Lighting

An abundance of light around the lavatory sink is necessary. But there are better solutions than strips of round theatrical lights or their fluorescent counterparts. Halogen lights placed above or beside a mirror provide adequate lighting, as do recessed fixtures in soffits overhead. In general, if a light fixture is not going to be part of the room's decorative system it is better to use recessed lighting, which provides ample light while remaining stylistically neutral.

I have an aversion to fluorescent lighting, but I have found a couple of notable exceptions: the Lightolier "Lytetube" (#41927), which can be surface mounted on a mirror, and the Lightolier "Capsule" (#4072), which is attractive mounted to either side of a small mirror.

#### The Medicine Cabinet

I have never figured out why all manufactured medicine cabinets are

so small. From a design perspective, each component in the lavatory/mirror/cabinet area should balance proportionally with the bathroom's other elements, such as floor space, ceiling height, and the positions of the toilet and the tub/shower. That manufactured medicine cabinets are so small poses an immediate obstacle to this integration of parts.

One solution is to use custom-made medicine cabinets. My standard recessed medicine cabinet is made of melamine, a plastic resin heat-bonded onto particle board. I have it built to the exact dimensions I need, with adjustable melamine shelves, full overlay hinges, and a mirror door. A local cabinet shop charges me \$200 to \$250, depending on size and complication of the surrounding frame. However, not all bathrooms require a recessed medicine cabinet. There are many instances in which it is not desirable to have seams in a mirror behind the sink and in which the storage function is better served by a shallow base cabinet. I recently designed such a unit for a condominium project in a renovated shingle-style building.

This bathroom's floor plan predetermined the placement of the vanity (see Figure 3). Given the bathroom's small size, I wanted to avoid a traditional vanity, which I felt would be too massive, particularly as viewed from the side upon entrance. The solution was a vanity unit comprised of two shallow side cabinets flanking a rounded, open-bottom skirt for the sink. To further lighten the mass I framed the upper section with two fluted pilasters, which supported a slightly projecting light soffit detailed to look like an architrave with cornice. In this case the placement of the sink and the size of the mirror precluded a recessed medicine cabinet, but the shallow side base cabinets substituted nicely. ■

*Jeanne Vanecko, of Vanecko, Ltd., Cambridge, Mass., is an architect specializing in kitchen and bath design and residential renovations, and a lecturer at the Harvard School of Design.*