

Shower Shape Up

by Lynn Comeskey

Showers used to be designed either by sadists who wanted to put people in caves or by people whose only consuming interest was the homeowner's privacy. These tiled-shower stalls had a low, 7-foot ceiling, and the entrances were even lower. The door jambs were 24 inches wide, and the doors themselves were made of opaque glass. But it appears that homeowners' ideas of privacy are changing, and they are open to new concepts in showers.

When we receive a request to repair or remodel such a shower, we propose to open it up. We remove the low ceiling; the 24-inch opening is widened by removing the jambs, and we recommend clear glass (see figure 1).

We have been quite successful selling this approach. The bathroom opens into the shower, and this creates more space in what is typically a small room. If you use the clear glass, this opening up is very graphic. Remodeling can be economical because this redesign uses less tile trim, the most expensive part of tile work. Also, there could be less field tile to install.

With so many new and interesting tiles available, it is a shame to hide them behind an opaque door. The clear glass allows you to display it (it

is, after all, the second most costly part of the bath).

If the shower is a walled-in "neo-angle" unit (a square with one corner cut off), we still remove the walls to open up the room. The results are even better in terms of perceiving a larger room. In the event the lav butts to the shower wall, we leave a short wall in place between it and the shower. We build a vanity there and tile it. The wall can be the same height as the counter. But if you make it 4 inches higher, you can create an end splash. In either case, the shower and counter would have the same tile. We then install a shorter fixed glass panel on top of the short wall as a part of the enclosure (see figure 2).

Clear Glass Not Trouble Free

Naturally, you don't get something for nothing. A clear-glass enclosure requires homeowner maintenance. The soap-laden water dries on the glass and leaves a film of soap. We have found that a coat of Turtle Wax applied to the glass once a month makes the water bead up and run off. This reduces the soap build-up. In any event, it is important to mention this potential problem ahead of time to homeowners. Most of my customers don't mind the added cleaning, because the clear glass looks so good.

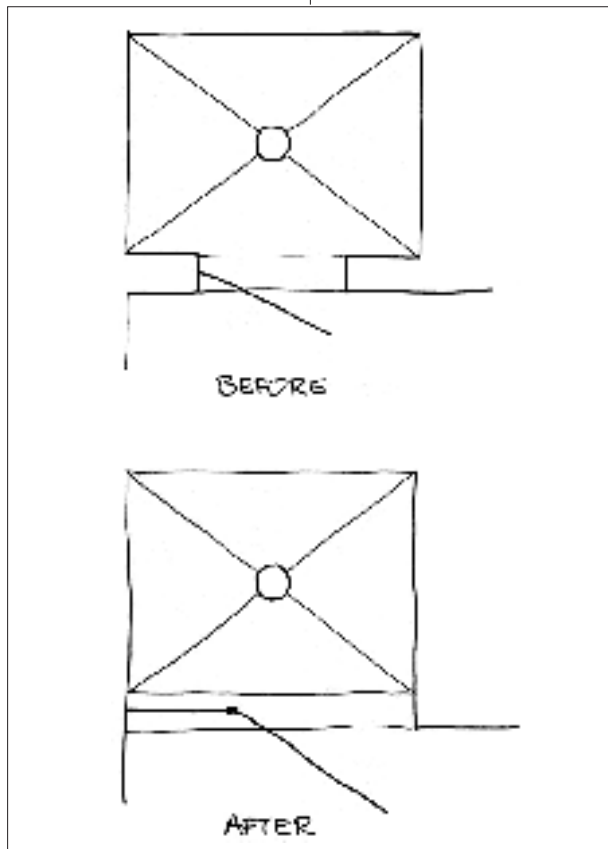


Figure 1. When remodeling a shower, we propose removing the low ceiling, widening the narrow jambs, and installing clear glass.

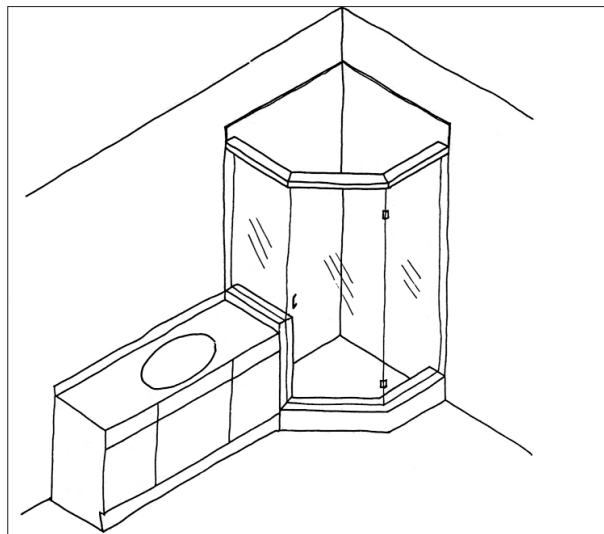


Figure 2. If the lav butts the shower wall, leave a short wall in place between it and the shower, build a vanity there, and tile it.

There is quite a bit of layout time involved, and with the trim work for the tile setter, the niche can cost as much as \$200 to complete.

Built-In Features

There are a number of other features that can be added when remodeling a shower. Probably the most popular feature is a soap and shampoo niche. We find out where the homeowner wants to put these niches, but we tell them that if we use existing studs we avoid framing special openings. Naturally, openings can be reframed if they have to be.

When framing a top and bottom block are put in place to define the location. Remember that the finished opening will be at least 2 inches less in each direction, so account for the thickness of the mortar and tile. Also, we measure the homeowners' bathroom-soap and shampoo containers to be certain they will fit when the niche is complete. There is quite a bit of layout time involved, and with the trim work for the tile setter the niche can cost as much as \$200 to complete.

Benches are also popular. It is important that they are big enough to perform their intended function. A triangular corner bench may look large on paper, yet it will prove to be smaller when you determine the number of square feet you can spare for a bench. During construction, it is important that the framed bench be completely water tight.

Multi-Head Showers

A very nice feature is to have several shower heads on opposing walls or high and low on the same wall. As soon as you plan more than one head, it is a

good idea to consult with your plumber to make sure the pipes are large enough to provide an adequate volume of water.

Also, when the heads are on opposing walls, water will spray in all directions. Make certain the heads are located so the water will stay inside the enclosure when the door is opened.

Hand-held showers are becoming very popular. They are very useful not only for hosing the body, but the shower tile and glass as well.

When considering the placement of the valves for turning the water on and off, it may be good to install them on a wall other than where the heads are. Sometimes it is even good to install them outside the shower. This keeps the homeowner from spraying himself with cold or hot water when he first runs the water.

Now that the shower is so open, you may not need a light. But it might be nice. Be certain that the light is code-approved for wet locations. It will probably have to be on a ground fault interrupt circuit.

Lastly, whether we spot signs of it or not, we have found water damage in approximately 50 percent of the showers we remodel. It is a good idea to forewarn the homeowner. Water damage is a scary subject for most homeowners, and they usually imagine the worst. Most of the time, it is relatively cheap to fix, and we try to assure them of this ahead of time.

I will be doing a future column on shower-pan materials. I would like to hear from readers regarding the tried and true hot mop, lead, and copper pans as well as any experience you may have with some of the new products such as choroloy. How long have you been using these products and how do they hold up? ■

Lynn Comeskey is a remodeling contractor who specializes in kitchens and baths. He is from Mountain View, California.