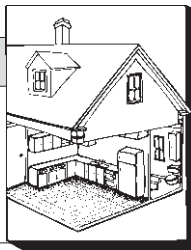


## Give the Bath a Facelift

by Paul Turpin



**Figure 1.** With these tools, and a little elbow grease, cleaning and regrouting tiles becomes an easier task. This little handsaw, from Superior Featherweight Tools, can be used to chip old grout out of tile work. A dental pick, at right, is good for narrow grout lines and corners.

When money's tight, homeowners aren't willing to pay for an all-out bathroom makeover. A good alternative is to offer a full menu of low-cost improvements that go a long way toward improving appearances. Your goal should be to give your customers the biggest change for the buck.

Bathroom facelifts alter surface appearances only. The first rule is to disturb the interior envelope of the room as little as possible. Structural changes, even minor items like putting in a bigger window, will almost always entail a succession of trades — tile subs, carpenters, drywallers, and so on — to make things right again. To keep costs low, limit yourself to items you can do yourself or that you can hire one tradesperson to do.

### Big Changes, Small Expense

Putting in a new floor, adding a mirrored wall, replacing an old toilet — these are the kinds of things that update a bath without a lot of fuss. The danger here is that once you've added one new element, the rest of the bath may look old and dirty by comparison. You'll need to work closely with your customers to make sure the old and the new tie in neatly.

**Wall coverings.** A coat of paint is one of the least expensive updates, unless the plaster is cracked and crumbling. As long as the plaster is structurally sound (it doesn't flex when you press on it and it is solidly attached to the wall), you can use one of the woven fiberglass wall coverings, such as those made by Tasso (1239 E. Newport Center Dr., Suite 118, Deerfield Beach, FL 33442; 800/888-2776). Aside from their ability to hide uneven substrates (they also work well over paneling), these wall coverings are totally inorganic. That means mold and mildew are seldom a problem. Woven fiberglass wall coverings are hung just like conventional wallpaper. Tasso recommends using clear, heavy-duty, vinyl-type adhesive to secure it. Once the wall covering is up, you can leave it white or paint it.

**Tile.** Ceramic tile flooring, counters, or walls are almost always salvageable as long as the tiles aren't broken and the substrate is stable. I've seen 70-year-old tile jobs take on the gleam of youth when they're thoroughly cleaned and, if necessary, regROUTED. Both steps require endurance, elbow grease, and a few

specialty items, but the process is at least one fifth the cost of installing new tile.

To remove soap scum, mineral deposits, and surface stains from tile, I use a pumice stone about the size of a candy bar (available at plumbing supply stores). First wet the stone, then start scrubbing. As the pumice crumbles and mixes with the water, it creates a slightly abrasive slurry that won't scratch the tile glaze. This process works equally well on sinks, tubs, and other glazed surfaces.

An alternative to pumice is a mesh coated with an aluminum oxide abrasive that lets you "sand" off dirt and stains (available from Oatey, 4700 W. 160th St., Cleveland, Ohio 44135; 216/267-7100). While the mesh is usually used to clean copper tubing, I know of contractors who also use it to get excess grout off tiles.

Removing old grout is a tedious job. I use an inexpensive little handsaw made by Superior Featherweight Tools (1325 Bixby Dr., Industry, CA 91745; 818/961-1521). Available at tile dealers and plumbing supply stores, the saw has a blade coated with tungsten carbide that will chip away the old grout (see Figure 1). Unfortunately, the blade will also scratch the tile so you need to make sure it doesn't stray. Since the blade is too wide for very narrow grout lines and for picking the tiny stuff out of corners, I use a dental pick.

**Refinishing tubs and sinks.** Here's a low-cost alternative to replacing a fixture, especially if replacement also involves new tile work or structural changes. You'll want to hire a good tradesman, but finding the right person for the job isn't easy. Your best source is referrals from plumbing supply stores or kitchen and bath retailers. Make sure you hire someone who is licensed (if required in your state) and who provides a warranty. It is also a good idea to check references.

While most refinishers go about their work in slightly different ways, Sarah Williams, president of Cermaglaize, a refinishing firm in Sylmar, Calif., says most use a polyurethane/polyester finish that can be matched to any color and sprayed on almost anything, including fiberglass, cast iron, vitreous china, and cultured marble. The material does not work with acrylic products. Williams also recommends against using epoxy

finishes, which tend to yellow and crack.

To prepare for the refinisher, have a plumber remove the faucets, trim, and drain cover since it looks better when the new finish covers the original holes. The refinishing process uses different types of acids and chemical sprays, so it's important to thoroughly mask off the surrounding areas. Then let the refinisher have at it.

### Out With the Old

Second to renewing or refinishing surfaces, the easiest facelift is to install new fixtures and fittings. The bathroom sink faucet is a favorite for replacement, as are old light fixtures and electrical coverplates. The sink is a good candidate if you're replacing the counter. For a clean look, I often replace the top of the vanity with a new, one-piece cultured marble or solid-surface counter and sink.

One of the least expensive changes you can make is to replace drawer and door pulls. You can also revitalize cabinetry with new doors. For instance, the typical 30-year-old, walnut-stained vanity (the kind with the tiny doors and drawers that offer barely enough room for a few towels and cleaning supplies) can be transformed by adding raised panel doors and coating the unit with white lacquer. You can make the doors yourself or you can order them through one of the catalogs put out by the different cabinet door fabricators, such as Decore-Active Specialties Inc. (4414 No. Azusa Canyon Rd., Irwindale, CA 91706; 800/729-7255).

If the bathroom is dominated by one of those monstrous vanities that were so popular 20 or 30 years ago, consider junking it and putting a pedestal sink in its place. You'll have to find a way to provide storage and some counter space elsewhere, perhaps by adding a small chest of drawers or some antique bookshelves. ■

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