

Shower Stalls And Tub Enclosures

by Paul Turpin

Showers are more than cramped cubbyholes these days. Separate stalls, once popular in the '30s and '40s, are back in style. Compared to the claustrophobic, fully-enclosed shower stalls of days gone by, shower enclosures now are larger, let in more light, and offer elaborate features such as multiple shower heads, bench seats, and steam. These 2-, 3-, and 4-sided glass surrounds open up the interior of the bathroom, eliminating the constricting mass of full-partition walls inside the bathroom. Even the styles, colors, and glazing patterns in combination tub/shower doors are so varied that virtually any taste can be satisfied.

Price Vs. Quality

At the low end are cheap-o tub-enclosure kits for the do-it-yourselfer. These often cost less than \$100. The professional who warrants his works would do well to steer clear of them. Common prob-

lems include poorly-made door wheels that break, flimsy towel bars that fall off, rubber door gaskets that fail, and metal finishes that corrode or flake.

Some of the mid-range (\$100 to \$300) packages might be suitable for a children's bath, but look carefully at the hardware to see that it is up to the task. Is it well-designed? Is it made of durable materials? Can it be replaced if necessary? One nice, now common feature is a continuous magnetic-vinyl strip that replaces the old-style ball latch. This forms a positive seal, but I saw one recently with a fine magnetic strip but a poor meeting rail, which sometimes prevented the door from closing at all.

At the upper end of the shower-stall spectrum sit custom packages. Kitchen and bath specialty shops typically offer frame and panel components that can be fitted to your specific job. Look for a show-

room display, so you can get a good sense of how the system goes together before you buy.

Glazing contractors are another good source of supply, but make sure you find one who regularly handles shower and tub enclosures.

Here are three manufacturers of quality components that I know of: Alumax Bath Enclosures (2821 E. Philadelphia, Ontario, CA 91761; 800/643-1514) features lightweight frames with square cross-sections that are good for a minimalist look. Century Shower Door (20100 S. Normandie Ave., Torrance, CA 90502; 213/321-6331) offers heavier frame extrusions with unique tubular cross-sections for a more substantial look. American Shower Door (6920 E. Slauson Ave., City of Commerce, CA 90040; 800/421-2333) makes "frameless" enclosures, expensive custom curves, and frames with fancy plated finishes, in addition to more standard items.

Glazing

Clear glazing has become increasingly popular. It's great for showing off tile work, and it can visually open up a room. But customers should be warned that water-spotting will mean more work to keep the view crystal clear. In lieu of this, you might suggest opaque glazing. The varieties of opaque, patterned glass are so numerous that they defy description. If cost isn't a factor, etching or sandblasting is also an option for customers who want a unique customized pattern. Keep in mind that any cutting, etching, beveling, or polishing must be done before the glass is tempered.

Code requires tempered or shatterproof glazing around tubs and showers. (This goes for *all* glass, by the way, including windows and skylights.) Tempering the glazing alters the molecular structure of the glass to strengthen it and to ensure that if the glass does break, it will produce small broken shards, instead of long, knife-like slivers. Tempering must happen *after* the glass has been cut to size; tempered glass cannot be cut or otherwise worked.

If your customer chooses a glass that can't be tempered, you can have it laminated to a sheet of clear tempered glass. Laminated glass relies on a film sandwiched between the tempered and

untampered layers to hold broken fragments together. If you've seen a windshield "starred" by a rock, you know the effectiveness of laminating. Glass that has been textured on both sides, however, just won't work. To laminate a piece of glass, at least one side must be smooth.

Metal Finishes

At the very least, metal frame components should be anodized. Anodizing coats the metallic surface with a protective film to prevent corrosion and flaking. Both satin and bright metallic finishes are available.

Next up in quality is a powder-coat finish — an automotive-like, baked-on paint. Powder coats allow a lot of flexibility in matching decorating schemes since virtually any color is possible, including custom blends. Manufacturers generally have stock available in the most popular colors (black is hot right now). For custom color-matching, the manufacturer or your glazing contractor can send the metal components out to an industrial powder-coat finisher, who selects the closest available match from a color chip. Matching a single color will add about \$300 to the basic cost of the unit.

There's a wide range of metal-plating options available, including polished brass, chrome, pewter, brushed nickel, and even 24K gold. Of course, the more unusual the finish the more expensive the price. A two-sided, standard-sized bathtub enclosure with an anodized, bright aluminum finish typically costs between \$400 and \$700, when it's installed by a glazing contractor. To go from this to solid brass with chrome-plating can add at least another \$1,600. If you opt for the 24K gold plating, add at least another \$7,800. The prices can be a lot more on large, custom shower enclosures.

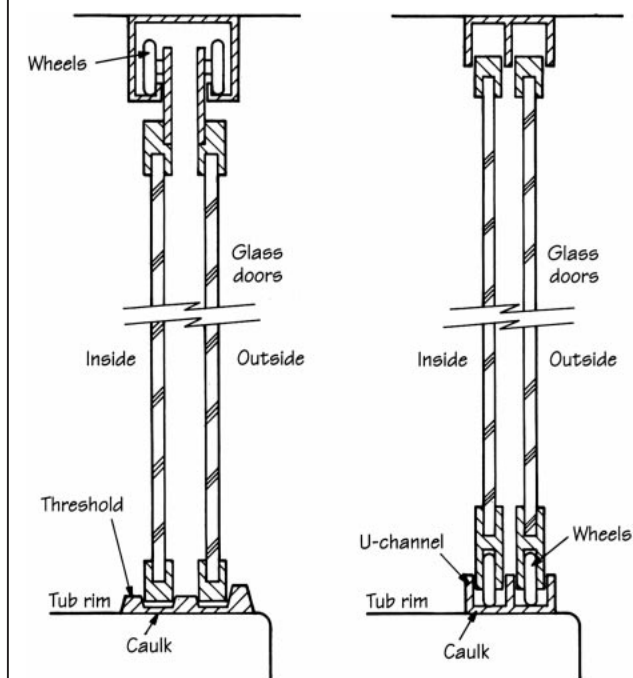
Door Mechanics

The mechanical operation of some shower and tub doors has improved over the years. Look for bathtub enclosures that have a flat bottom threshold, instead of the old U-channels, which are so difficult to clean. These newer units have top-hung sliding doors that continue to glide smoothly after time. Some makers offer three-panel doors that allow you to open up the tub for bathing, and make



Top-of-the-line shower stalls, such as this one from Alumax Bath Enclosures, are assembled from frame and panel components that can be fitted to a specific job.

Shower Door Sections



Look for bathtub enclosures that have a threshold (left), in place of the old U-channels (right), which are difficult to clean.

more sitting room on the lip of the tub for parents who have small children to bathe.

The installation of any shower door is critical. A shower or tub enclosure that leaks water can lead to damaged flooring or framing — a callback no one wants to have. Plan to throw an appropriate amount of time (and money) into an estimate for this. In remodels, the most difficult part of installing a new door is often removing the old one. Special care needs to be taken to remove the old caulk without scratching the tile and fixture surfaces. Expect

this to take far longer than putting in the new one. And unless you like the work and are willing to take the time to become intimate with the products, I recommend using an experienced glazing contractor for any custom installation. With products that aren't just plug-in units, there's a lot to be said for using someone who knows the product thoroughly and can guarantee his work. ■

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