

Bathing With Style

by Gordon Tully

Looking for a little design help, a friend and his wife recently sent me photos, a plan, a section, and a written program for a new bathroom in their mid-19th-century New England house. The room, on the second floor of a one-and-a-half-story Cape, was 7 feet wide by 12 feet deep, with a window facing east at the short end opposite the door and a 4x5-foot alcove to the left of the window. The alcove ceiling followed the sloping roof down to a 4-foot-high knee wall. To the right of the entry door was a natural plumbing chase adjacent to the chimney. The budget was in the cellar.

Their design had a tiled tub/shower in the alcove, the toilet next to the chase near the door, a long double-lavatory counter along the right-hand wall

and a built-in bench under the window so they could sit and watch their two-year-old son bathe.

I didn't like the long room with the fixtures lined up along the wall like condemned prisoners, so I fired back a proposal with the tub/shower enclosure to the right of the door where they had placed the lavatory counter, with the toilet beyond the tub and the lav counter running across the end wall in front of the window (which had a 20-inch sill). The framing ran the long way of the room, so it was okay to move the toilet down the wall.

I rationalized running the counter in front of the window on the grounds that the window would be curtained, this being a house in town with neighbors just

across a narrow street. In this plan, the combination storm sash would present a problem: It would be hard to operate from behind the counter, and could not be removed. So I suggested saving money by using a fiberglass tub-shower unit (now possible, since it did not have to fit under a sloped ceiling) and using the savings to replace the window along with its mate in the next room.

Well, all this rationalizing didn't wash, plus we couldn't mount a mirror over the right-hand lavatory without obscuring the entire window. We tried a compromise scheme with the lav counter in the alcove, but it failed because there was no way to fit a mirror above the lav under the sloped ceiling.

So we went back to the initial design, except we put the toilet near the outside wall and a small linen closet next to the chimney.

Developing a Better Perspective

This would be the normal place to stop designing, except that I didn't like what I saw when I drew a perspective sketch. The lavatory counter needed something to end against to keep it from looking like a big box set against the wall. Why not a screen wall running across the room for the lav to end against? As in some Japanese architecture, the screen would create a nearby plane to look through, like a row of trees in front of a more distant landscape. Unfortunately, to function as a full screen, any such wall would have to be in the plane of the wall on the near side of the tub enclosure. This would shorten the lavatory, eliminate the linen closet, and guarantee traffic congestion in the small space housing the lavatory. Since eliminating such congestion was a major reason for building a new bathroom, this design had to be abandoned.

I held onto the screen wall idea, but in the final design reduced the screen to a 42-inch-high stub wall at the end of the lav counter, housing a bookcase next to the toilet. Above the partitions, hanging plants would help create the screen I was looking for. My friends maintain that they do not have green thumbs, so I suggested Swedish ivy or spider plants, which can be killed only by the exceptionally determined.

On to the Finish

My friends had in mind a 19th-century look, consistent with the house's appearance in its youth. The floor will be carpeted for now; wood strip flooring with several coats of modern urethane varnish will come later. The final plan includes a wainscot of natural-finish vertical beaded boards, capped with a chair rail at 42 inches. This chair rail will run all around the room, forming the trim on top of the stub wall and capping the 6-inch backsplash behind the counter.

I suggested a wallpaper frieze band on the upper wall next to the ceiling, running over the door and window frame and forming the front to a dropped ceiling over the shower. Painting the middle section of wall a light color then separates the two darker bands — the wallpaper and the natural wood wainscot — and forms a background for the plants and other hanging decorations.

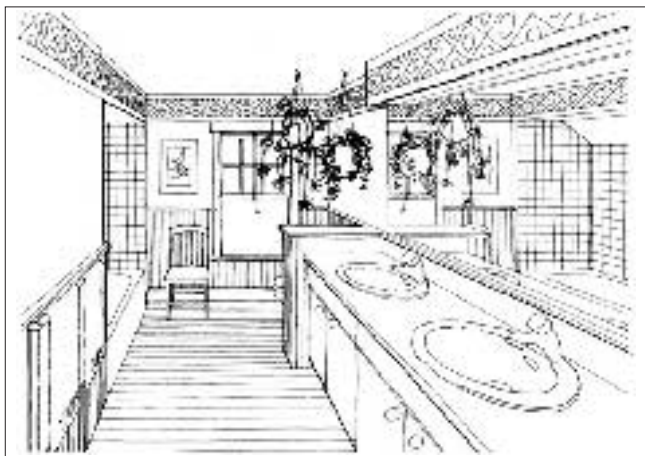
The lav cabinet will be finished to match the wainscoting, topped with a plastic laminate counter with 6-inch backsplash and two drop-in china bowls. My friends and I are ambivalent about most solid-surfacing options, and the budget rules that out for such a large counter in any case.

I proposed a full-width mirror over the lav from the backsplash to the frieze. While expensive and a minor nuisance to keep clean, a big mirror does wonders for a long narrow room, in this case duplicating the plants and the window and doubling the room's apparent width. A blank-front medicine cabinet will be recessed into the wall of the linen closet at the right end of the lav.

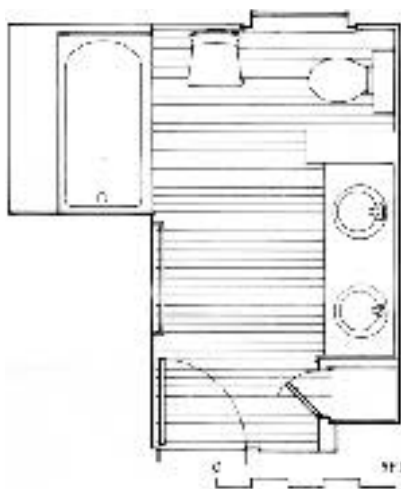
There will be a central combination fan/light near the toilet and tub, and a 4-foot color-corrected fluorescent strip over the mirror, concealed behind a boxed-in fascia covered with the wallpaper frieze.

While the screen-divider idea was impractical, it served as an important step toward the final design. My friends will be able to bathe with style and still have enough left in the bank to afford hot water! ■

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Plan View



A major challenge in designing this new bath was to place both a double vanity and a toilet along the long wall without making them look institutional. The solution was a half-height bookshelf overhung by potted plants that serves as a screen to divide the room. Wainscot and a wallpaper frieze help pull the room together, while a large mirror "widens" the room and doubles the window.