

Kitchen and Bath

Bathroom Fixture Clearances

by Carl Hagstrom

A bathroom doesn't have to be big to be functional. But as the bathroom gets smaller, the fixture clearances become more critical, and a compact bath can quickly turn into a crowded bath. When fixture space is at a premium, it's important to keep a close eye on proper clearances.

Critical Clearances

There are essentially two types of clearances that need to be considered when laying out a basic bath plan: fixture clearances and user clearances.

Fixture clearances are the easiest to define — you have to make sure that

there is enough space available to install the fixture.

User clearances are the areas needed to access and use the fixture, and these are open to interpretation. The user clearance required for each fixture stems from what I refer to as the “circle of comfort.” Place your hands on hips (your elbows should be sticking out), and turn completely around. You’ve just defined your minimum circle of comfort. For most people, a 3-foot diameter circle will provide plenty of elbow room.

The 2-3-5 Rule

To simplify bath layout, I use what I call the 2-3-5 rule. Each digit represents

Calculating Clearances

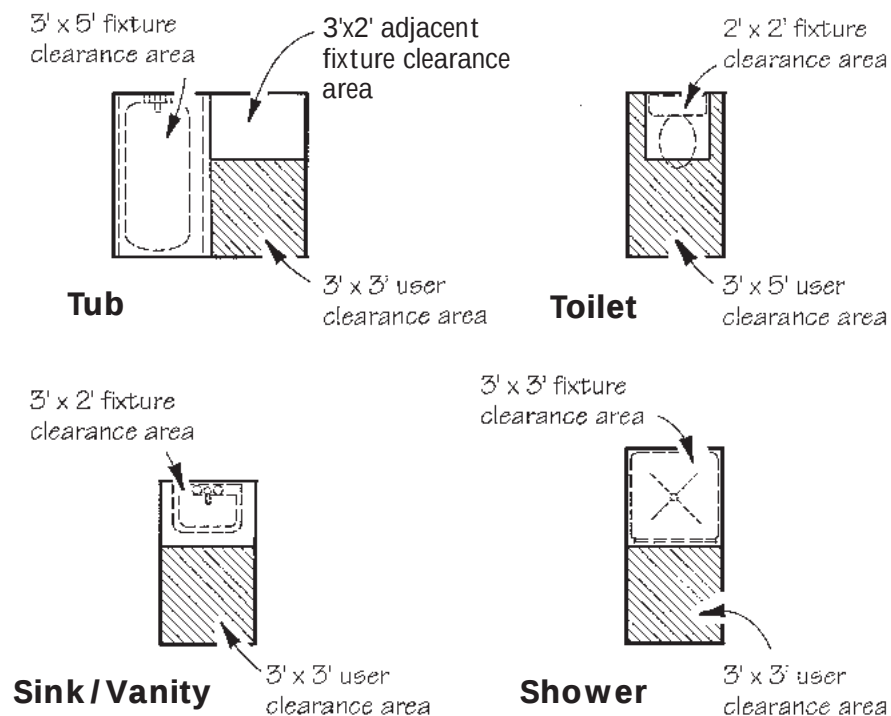


Figure 1. When laying out a bath plan, allow room for the fixture and the person who will be using the fixture. To simplify layout, the author calculates clearance areas using only three dimensions: 2, 3, or 5 feet.

"2-3-5" Fixture Layout

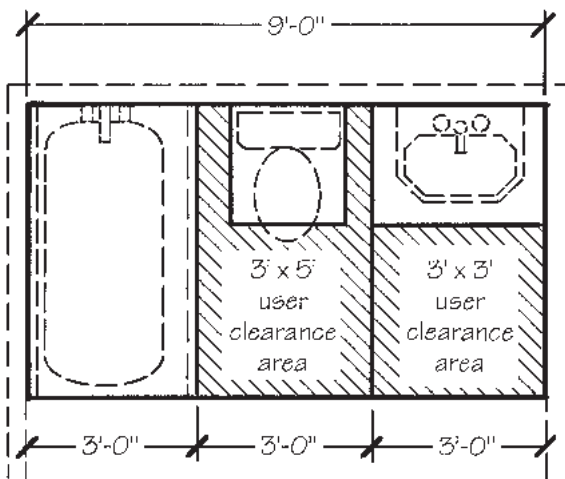
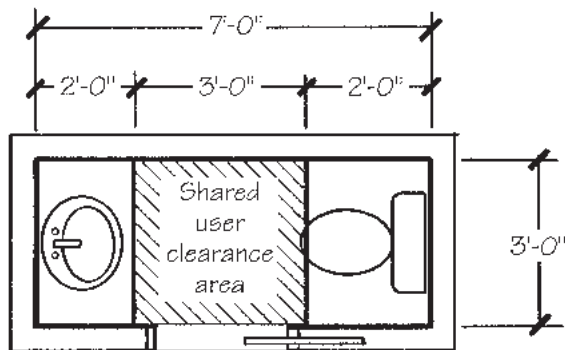


Figure 2. The bath examples shown at left were laid out using the 2-3-5 rule. In these efficient layouts, some fixtures share the required user clearance.



Shared Clearances

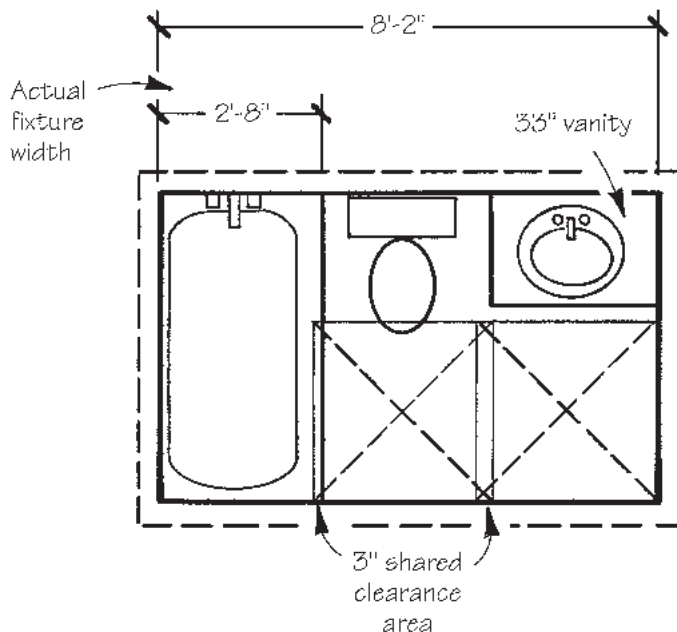


Figure 3. In some situations, elbow room from one clearance area may be shared with another area, reducing the overall clearance values. This will not apply to toilets when located next to sinks or tubs with glass doors.

a clearance value (in feet) that can be used as a “go or no go” gauge for vanities, toilets, one-piece tub and shower units, and the user clearance that accompanies each fixture. In Figure 1, user clearances that follow the 2-3-5 rule are shown for each bathroom fixture 2-3-5. The tub, for example, has a fixture area of 3x5 feet. The 3x3-foot user area shown for the tub assumes there is another fixture (either the vanity or the toilet) next to the tub — a common scenario in compact bathrooms. If a clearance is slightly less than the 2-3-5 rule target value, it doesn’t automatically mean the clearance is unacceptable, but it does mean that you will need to carefully examine the clearance value and decide whether it will be acceptable.

The two bathrooms shown in Figure 2 were laid out using the 2-3-5 rule. The bath layouts provide adequate clearances for each fixture and use floor space efficiently.

Bending the Rule

User areas can typically be reduced 3 to 4 inches on the sides not bordered by a wall, and 3 or 4 inches can be “borrowed” from an adjoining fixture user area (Figure 3). Since elbow room is only needed above the waist, the space above sinks, toilets, and tub curbs can be put on loan.

This space is not available when a toilet is located next to a sink (elbows will be lower when a person is seated), or when a tub is equipped with sliding doors.

Wide-Body Exceptions

All men may be created equal, but they do come in different sizes. Clearances should be increased to accommodate a wide-bodied person. When should you consider increasing clearances? I follow the 2-3-5 rule and reevaluate the clearances whenever the intended user weighs more than — you guessed it — 235 pounds. ■

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