

► Kitchen & Bath

When a Double Vanity Just Won't Fit

by Jim Kregel

The National Kitchen & Bath Association's (NKBA's) *Bathroom Planning Guidelines* provide practical dimensional requirements for every fixture used in the bathroom, along with the floor space required around fixtures and vanities. Of the 41 guidelines, it's difficult to implement even half of them in practice, however, for one simple reason: There's rarely enough space available. Still, the guidelines serve as a useful point of reference — it's handy to know what the generally accepted planning standards are before departing from them. And all of the guidelines consider safety first, a standard I would never depart from.

Despite the obstacles, our typical client would like us to remodel a standard, 5x9-foot bathroom to include a double vanity and a whirlpool tub.

We can't work miracles, but I'll offer some practical ideas on how to accomplish the impossible.

Two's a Crowd

A bathroom containing two lavs, or basins, is a terrific option, but to meet NKBA Guidelines 14 and 15 (and these are *minimum* space requirements), you must have 15 inches from the center of the first lav to an end wall or countertop edge, and then 30 inches from center of lav to the center of the next lav (see Figure 1). If you do the math, that calls for a minimum of 60 inches, or 5 feet of wall space. And 5 feet really isn't enough for comfortable, simultaneous use of both lavs. Six feet is a real-world comfort minimum, with 36 inches between lav centers. In fact, most research suggests

that a 42-inch-wide single vanity is the perfect size for most users.

The biggest complaint I address in designing a bathroom (or a kitchen) is lack of counter space. So I remind my space-challenged clients that a second sink isn't as useful as a larger mirror and extra counter space, which most couples have determined are what really make their shared bathroom work. I might also inquire whether they get ready at different times most mornings — if so, the need for a second bowl will be only occasional.

Since counter space is critical, don't forget to take advantage of the space above the toilet. I often run the countertop right over the tank, creating what is called a banjo top. But remember to leave the tank accessible for repair by making the section of counter that goes over the tank removable. Wall brackets or a piano hinge offer two obvious solutions.

Avoid the pedestal. Pedestal lavs are great design elements in the right setting and perfect complements in a powder room or guest bath, where a minimal form can make a small area seem larger. But they provide no counter space. Many wall-hung or table-mounted lavs leave the space feeling open while also providing a work surface around the basin (Figure 2, next page).

Vanity Height

While a 32-inch-high vanity is an industry norm, and one that works well in most children's baths, today's sophisticated, multi-user bathrooms often feature split-level, dual lavatories. Typically, the lower level is set between 30 and 34 inches, and the higher level from 34 to an extreme of 42 inches. In the 5x9 bath, a compromise height for a single lav is in order. I generally choose a 34- to 36-inch-high vanity that works well for the average adult's height. Compromise is a key element for remodeling in general — we rarely have an ideal space to work with.

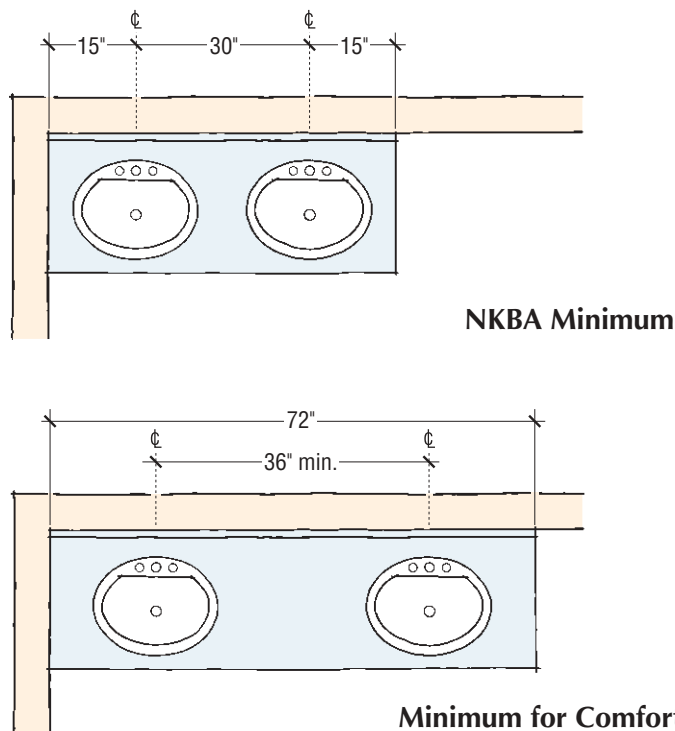


Figure 1. For baseline, minimum access, locate the centerline of a lav at least 15 inches from a side wall and space double lavs a minimum of 30 inches from center to center. For more comfortable use, allow at least 3 feet of wall space per user and 42 inches for a single vanity width.

► Kitchen & Bath

Mirrors & Lighting Help

Don't overlook the power of the mirror to transform a space. The number one rule for determining mirror size and placement is to make certain the mirror is both high and low enough to work for your clients. Being tall, I find that most mirrors are not installed high enough, forcing me to scrunch down to see while I shave or comb my hair. In the same context, don't forget shorter users and children. Can they see comfortably, without straining? There are no hard-and-fast rules on dimension here — go by your clients' heights and preference and what the space will allow. As a general rule, the bottom of a vanity mirror should be no higher than 40 inches above the floor. Don't overlook the incredible "enlarging" effect that custom-fitted mirrors have on a small bathroom space (see *Kitchen & Bath*, 8/02). You may not be able to make the room larger, but you can make it feel as though you did.

Lighting. Great mirrors without great lighting don't serve your client well. The rule of thumb that I apply here is to be certain there's good lighting on both sides of the mirror, with light fixtures placed at a height that will provide the greatest illumination at about the same height as the primary users' eyes (normally 3 to 6 inches lower than their overall height). Of course, with two users of different heights, you have to compromise. Overhead lighting alone, as in recessed can lights or a fan-light fixture, isn't adequate, as it tends to cast shadows and leave mirror users in the dark. Fixtures that surround the mirror (often referred to as Hollywood lighting) actually rate high, as they provide good continuous lighting without "hot spots" (Figure 3). 

Jim Kregel is a frequent lecturer on kitchen and bath design and lives in St. Paul, Minn.



Figure 2. A wall-mounted lav or basin provides the space-saving look of a pedestal lav along with much needed usable countertop space.



Figure 3. Effective use of mirrors can transform a small room (left). "Hollywood" lighting around the mirror provides good, even illumination without "hot spots." The best placement for individual mirror light fixtures is at eye level, or 3 to 6 inches lower than the typical user's height (below).

