

BY TOM MEEHAN



Tiling a Shower Niche

Shampoo niches are common in most tiled showers and tub enclosures these days. Some of my builder friends think they're doing me a favor by framing out the niche ahead of time. While I appreciate their wanting to help, it would be miraculous—or very lucky—for that niche to line up with the tile layout. Instead, I prefer to cut and frame the opening myself, so all I need is the rough location of the niche.

LAY OUT THE OPENING

My goal for the layout is twofold: Make the niche easy to install and as aesthetically pleasing as possible. To that end, I try to lay out the niche so that full-tile pieces land on all sides of it.

I lay out the tile for the niche wall from the center to avoid having small pieces along the edges. Keeping the niche in mind, if there is plumbing, electrical, or framing

that may be in the way, I adjust the layout accordingly.

I install the tile on the niche wall, running the courses up to within a foot or so of where the bottom of the niche will be. With those courses done, I can plot the exact location of the niche. I simply plumb up from the tile below so that the edge of the niche lines up with joints between the tiles (1). To find the top and bottom of the niche, I either measure up for the horizontal lines using the courses below, or level over from the tile courses on an adjacent wall (2).

After drawing the outline, I double-check the layout for the tile I'm using. Usually, I cut the backerboard to the exact edge of the layout line, planning for the niche tile to bullnose over the edge of the wall tile. But if I'm installing tile like stone tile, for which I bullnose my own edges, I lap the wall tile over the niche tile for a cleaner look and make the opening wider by the thickness of a



tile. Another option is installing a finish strip around the perimeter of the niche.

CUTTING OUT AND FRAMING THE NICHE

Before I start cutting, I double-check for any wires or pipes in the wall. Then I cut through the cement board with a reciprocating saw (3), running the saw blade slightly inside the layout line to allow for slight adjustments. I use a saw instead of a grinder to generate less dust.

Framing the inside of the niche is slightly different every time. The horizontal framing pieces are cut out of 2-by stock that matches the depth of the wall framing. I cut these pieces so that they fit loosely between the wall studs. I spread latex-modified thinset on the inside of the wallboard where the framing pieces will be located, as well as on edges of the pieces themselves (4).

After tapping those pieces into place, I drive screws through the cement board and into the framing. For the vertical framing, I

cut and install 2-by pieces to fit between the horizontal pieces I just installed. If I'm lucky, the opening lands on a stud, so I only need to add framing along one side. If I need less than the thickness of a 2-by, I build out the stud with latex-modified thinset or strips of backerboard. When the framing is done, I drive screws into all sides of the niche (5).

WATERPROOFING

To waterproof the niche, I install a membrane like Schluter System's Kerdi membrane. After measuring and cutting the membrane, I dry-fit it in the framed cut-out, slicing the bottom corners where the membrane will overlap. Then I spread a layer of thinset over the whole niche with a 1/8-inch V-notched trowel (6) and press the fabric carefully into the cavity. At the bottom where the membrane overlaps, I apply thinset between the layers to bond and set the corners (7).

With the membrane in place, I flatten it and squeeze out any excess thinset with a

putty knife, which also pushes out any air bubbles (8). At that point, I can spread thinset over the niche and start tiling or wait a day. Either way is fine.

TILING

When tiling a niche, I make sure the trowel I use has the right-size notches. It's important that the tiles on the back and side walls of the niche line up with the walls of the main shower (9).

Most of the time, I install a solid piece of stone or some other solid product for the bottom shelf, pitched outward slightly for drainage. I often install a second shelf, which I only cut into the side walls of the niche unless the shelf is very fragile. This shelf doesn't need to be pitched because water can simply drain behind the shelf and down the tiled back wall of the niche.

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Fiberglass Wood-Replacement Gutters

BY KYLE DIAMOND

In the August issue, I wrote an article, “Premature Trim Failure,” about an exterior restoration project in Millbrook, N.Y., where we replaced the existing siding and trim with more-durable materials. An important detail on that project we didn’t discuss was the gutters, which we also replaced. The home’s existing wood (fir) gutters were in bad shape. The gutter’s ends were rotted, and their end caps missing (1). And most of the mitered seam-work leaked, leading to paint failure and rot (2). My clients asked if we could repair them, and although I didn’t hold out much hope for their restoration, I promised to look into the matter.

While researching gutter restoration online, I came across fiberglass wood-replacement gutters manufactured by The Fiberglass Gutter Co., located in Pembroke, Mass. The website noted high durability and impact

resistance, and low expansion and contraction rates. Though made of fiberglass, the gutters were molded from wood gutters using a process that transferred the grain look and texture to the fiberglass. From the ground, the product is indistinguishable from traditional wood but won’t rot and requires only minimal maintenance (the usual seasonal cleaning of leaves and debris). I figured out the lineal footage we needed, including a waste factor that made sense for the house configuration and material lengths, and called the company. The business manager, Russ Allen, gave me a fixed price that included shipping and all materials we’d need to complete the job. I ran this option by the owners, and they were quickly onboard.

Factory demonstration. Having never worked with fiberglass, I arranged to visit the factory for a product demonstration. The pro-

duction manager, Tom Moore, showed me around and explained that the factory made four standard profiles molded from traditional 4x5 and 4x6 wood gutters (3). (The company can make custom shapes, such as radius gutters, as well.) I was given a quick tour of the manufacturing room, where he demonstrated how the finished gutters were released from the molds (4). Moore then went over gutter-installation techniques, using a mock-up of a roof’s cornice return.

For cutting, Moore used a standard miter saw with the same fine-tooth cutting blade used for cutting wood. He recommended using a vacuum attachment on the saw and wearing a NIOSH-approved respirator whenever cutting (5) or mixing the gel-coat resin. For fastening, he recommended stainless steel GRK structural screws, driven into the rafter tails (6). Moore pointed out that

Photos by Tim Healey and Kyle Diamond



the gutter's thin profile nearly doubles its carrying capacity compared with that of traditional wood gutters and noted that the GRKs are more than capable of handling this extra load. To secure the "floating" ends of a mitered seam, he glued them together with FastCap 2P-10 adhesive. The 2P-10 usually provides a good seal, but as a precaution, to prevent the gel coat from leaking, he suggested taping off the outer face of the mitered seam to create a "patch."

"Glassing in" the seams. To execute a clean patch, Moore roughed up the gutter's hardened, gel-coat surface to promote bonding between the gutter and the fiberglass patch (7). The sanded area was then wiped down with acetone. Next—wearing a NIOSH-approved respirator, latex gloves, and eye protection—he mixed the gel-coat resin (1 ounce of hardener for every 50 ounces of

resin). He "wetted in" the first layer of 2-ounce mesh with gel coat using a brush; then wetted in a second, thicker layer of chopped strand mesh (8). Once the patch hardened, the joined-gutter sections acted as one piece.

Lastly, Moore demonstrated how, for general touch-up, to infill the gutter's exterior-side mitered seam with a white gel-coat putty that's similar to Bondo. He added a couple of drops of hardener to a gumball-sized amount of putty, mixed it thoroughly, and carefully applied it to the seam with a putty knife (9). Afterwards, he wiped away the excess, resulting in a well-hidden joint.

On the jobsite. We needed to install roughly 250 lineal feet of gutter and had to contend with three 50-foot-plus runs of gutter, which needed to be made from two pieces (the maximum manufactured gutter length is 40 feet). We joined the sections on

the ground (10), attached spacer blocks (lined up with the building's rafter tails), then picked up the long gutter runs and put them in place (11). Each run pitched towards new, 3-inch-round white aluminum leaders. At returns, we had to fiberglass the mitered seams in place, working off ladders. That was a little tricky and added to the job's small learning curve (12).

Overall, I paid about \$31 per foot compared with roughly \$20 per foot for a new fir gutter. But the \$31 also included the GRK fasteners, fiberglass resin and mesh, patching putty, PVC drop tubes, end-cap stock, and shipping—and the homeowners now have a much more durable product.

Kyle Diamond co-owns New Dimension Construction, in Millbrook, N.Y., with his father, Dale Diamond.