

With improvements large or small, your bathroom can be an oasis



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THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

Posted Mar 06, 2010 @ 12:00 AM

Last update Mar 06, 2010 @ 12:38 AM

Once so lightly regarded it was relegated to the backyard, bathrooms have come a long way since the days of outhouses and rain barrel tubs.

Today the bathroom — especially the master bath — is treated as a coveted living space, and perhaps the most indispensable room in the home. A nice bathroom can also boost the resale value of your home.

“The trends we saw five years ago in kitchens have extended to bathrooms,” said Darlene Weaver, president and owner of Distinctive Designs.

Room to move

Perhaps more than anything else, people are looking for more space. Professional contractors have noticed that empty-nesters in particular are apportioning more of their living spaces to the bathroom.

“The kids have moved out, and they no longer need that extra bedroom. We’ll make that into a walk-in closet and a master bath and turn it into a master suite,” said Tom Biggs of J.J. Swartz

Co., a remodeling and restoration business in Decatur.

The master suite is a concept that's grounded in a certain degree of luxury. It combines the master bedroom and master bath into a single space that Weaver described as "a retreat for the homeowner." People have experienced this kind of living in hotels or resorts and want to adopt it to their everyday living.

Small expenses

Of course a major redesign doesn't fit with everyone's budget.

One thing that can be done for relatively little money is peeling off the wallpaper in favor of paint. And not just shades of white or beige — varied and vivid color schemes are in style for the bathroom.

Other small projects that can make a big difference include updating the fixtures or the vanity. And perhaps the least expensive option: updating what hangs in your bathroom.

"New towels and a new shower curtain, and you can have a whole new look," Weaver said.

Showers

Perhaps the most significant change has been the separation of shower and tub into two separate units. Many homeowners are even choosing to dispense with the tub altogether, especially the oversized Jacuzzi-like models that may have seemed like a good idea at one time, but never proved practical.

"We have people tell us, 'I haven't been in it in three years,'" Weaver said.

Because showers are more conducive to the morning routine, more emphasis has been placed on giving them a spa atmosphere.

Multiple-head showers are popular. Shower heads can be affixed to the ceiling or wall. On some, the spray is mixed with air and light to produce varying sensations. Body sprays can be installed into walls at desired heights.

For a less expensive option, hand showers are becoming more common, especially among older homeowners who are also installing seats in their showers.

A hand shower features a hand-held nozzle attached to a flexible hose that can be used while you sit in the shower. Inexpensive models attach to the existing shower head and cost about \$21. More elaborate models with shiny finishes and options for the strength of the spray can cost more than \$100.

Doors

Although it may sound like a minor spec, another advancement in bathroom design is the use of thicker-panes in glass shower doors.

Typical framed, 1/4-inch glass doors are difficult to maintain and “can get pretty nasty pretty quickly,” Weaver noted. “A wonderful thing that’s out on the market now is a 3/8-inch thick shower door.”

The heavier glass doors are hinged and don’t require a frame. That makes them easier to clean and gives them a more aesthetically pleasing look. Many of Weaver’s clients favor clear glass to act as a window and showcase the tile and decor of the shower unit.

Some hinged doors — often called pivot doors — can cost as little as \$250, depending on the size. Fancier models can top \$800.

Staying seated

For those who still desire a nice soak, there are advancements in tubs, including models that come equipped with the technology to provide a complete sensory experience.

Whirlpool offers a 7-foot long hot tub featuring chromotherapy, an alternative medicine technique that proposes to affect mood through the use of color and light patterns. A touch screen panel controls seven different light patterns, along with digital stereo sound and 15 air jets to provide hydromassage therapy. At \$2,799, the tub is priced out of most homeowner’s budgets.

Down below

More practical and more affordable options for comfort are available, including underfoot. While the trend is away from carpeting in the bathroom, the feel of cold tile on bare feet first thing in the morning is something most people have not warmed to.

Rather than returning to the days of soggy shag, many are turning to heated flooring systems. Gina Hewlett of Arizona Tile Co. in Springfield said the company offers two types of systems.

The advantage of tube heating (tubes under the floor are filled with hot water) is it can be placed in desired locations more precisely — say, in front of the vanity, toilet and shower. It is more expensive, however, because concrete must be poured over the tubing after it is installed.

Heated floor mats are a more economical solution — for as little as a few hundred dollars, depending on how much of the floor you want heated, according to HGTV.com.

The mats are placed on the unfinished floor and then the flooring tiles can be laid directly on top of them. Newer versions can be trimmed to fit around fixtures.

“Heating companies can’t claim that they’re a radiant heat, but the end result of adding heat to the floor is that heat rises, so it is making the room warmer,” Hewlett said.

All of the systems are compatible with any type of tile. They also come available with a programmable thermostat that can be set to warm the floor to a desired temperature an hour or so before awakening in the morning.

“It’s just a nice little comfort that’s available now. And you’ll never talk to anyone who has it who doesn’t like it,” Hewlett said.