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BATHROOMS



Bathrooms are complicated. They're generally small spaces requiring many decisions, from tile choices to cabinet pulls. The house has three bathrooms and an upstairs powder room. I spent the most amount of time and money on the master baths. Let's take the easier ones first.

The powder room is very straightforward. It's a 5' x 5' square with a toilet and floating vanity (wall-hung that doesn't go all the way to the floor). To create a sense of continuity, the plank flooring from the great room flows into it. It's in the part of the house that has ten-foot ceilings. I had some discussion on ceiling height with our contractor and foreman, and after a couple of days of back and forth, pros and cons, we all settled on dropping the ceiling to the standard 8' height; otherwise, that small room might have felt more like a mine shaft.

I've been in many homes where the powder room walls and fixtures are all unique to create a different feel. We all agreed that keeping the same color and design scheme throughout the house gave it a more expansive and modern sense. As I did in all the bathrooms, I chose an upscale one-piece Toto toilet that was also very water efficient with a 1.2-gallon flush. Thinking about budget, I found a one-piece white porcelain sink with broad wings forming a countertop. It dropped on top of the floating vanity. This saved the extra cost of fabricating a counter and installing a sink. I went with a sleek single-handle faucet, which I used in all the bathrooms. Thinking of repairs and washers, I wanted to standardize all the faucets, which meant keeping fewer backup parts.

We hung a wall mirror behind the sink and put a single LED light bar fixture above it. I chose the Panasonic whisper-quiet fans for all the bathrooms. They are quiet to the point you can barely hear them,

and I had read that some owners tended to forget they were on. I solved that problem with pushbutton timer switches running 5-30 minutes. Saying this with a smile, there is a flip side to having a louder fan — especially in a powder room. It can offer the privacy of white noise for the user. Sound masking wasn't a concern because all our solid-core doors are extra thick.

The guest suite bathroom was designed with two doors. One door entered from the den, and the other from the guest bedroom. This would be ideal if we had a larger family visiting with parents in the guest room and kids on air mattresses in the den. The size of the bathroom is a little larger than most, and it was determined by the dimensions of the back wall of the guest bedroom and den to have a straight wall on the backside that would ultimately become the gym/storeroom. It was about 11' wide and 6 1/2' deep. The large size allowed the two entry doors to swing into the room.

That large size brought with it some challenges and opportunities. I had room for a bigger vanity and extra storage to extend the cabinet to the floor. To save on cost, I used a wider version of the same sink with counter wings that I used in the powder room. There was still leftover space next to the vanity, and my contractor and I decided a great way to “fill the hole” was with a matching linen cabinet.

Our family prefers showers, so tubs were ruled out in the upstairs bedroom suites. For relaxing soaking, we'd have the hot tub outside. Though our use for the home was contemplated as part-time, it seemed to make good sense from both a guest standpoint and future resale that we had at least one bathroom with a tub. As much as an occasional guest soak, it's a place for washing off dogs and young children. Because I had the space, I chose a solid porcelain cast iron Kohler tub 6" inches longer than a standard 60" bathtub. While more and more acrylic tubs are being used today, there's something substantially comforting about the solidity of a cast iron bathtub. At 400 pounds, I'm sure our plumber appreciated that it was on the lower level.

Even with the longer tub, the greater width of the bathroom required us to frame out a shelf to fill in the space from the tub's back edge to the wall. Traditionally, for tub/shower combinations, you either go with a shower curtain rod (I like and have used the

curved ones that arc out, creating a little more width) or sliding glass doors. I'm not a fan of sliding glass doors; I've never found it comfortable stepping in and out of them. Inevitably, the tracks accumulate soap and grime, and the track and glass panels are a cleaning hassle. It looked like I would need to have an extra long shower curtain rod fabricated to fit, and as I was considering that, I remembered some glass shower panels I had seen and liked in some European hotels. I found a much better visually pleasing solution than a shower bar and curtain. I purchased a two-piece folding glass shower panel affixed to the wall at the front end of the tub and held in place by a small channel along the top front side. The two glass panels were hinged in the middle to be folded and swung out for easier access and cleaning of the tub spout, valve, and shower head.



A spacious guest bath. The elongated tub with a Euro-style glass shower panel that folds out. The larger room accommodates two doorways from the guest bedroom and the den.

It was also an excellent mid-way price solution between a shower rod/curtain and a sliding glass shower door. We have found it easy to use and to keep clean.

Like all the bathrooms, the vanity has a single-handled faucet, and I am thinking of future use as a full-time resident; it also has a

medicine cabinet (more on that in a moment). Like the powder room, a bright LED light bar was installed above the medicine cabinet, but I also added a light above the tub and a whisper-quiet fan.

Finally, it's worth mentioning how we handle towels in all bathrooms. Fifteen years earlier, when we bought the downtown condo we now live in, the bathroom had towel hooks instead of bars. We became instant fans, and there was no question about going with hooks in the mountain house. Draped towels add a different look of color and texture, but they are so much more convenient to use by avoiding the constant need (if you're neat) to fold, hang, and even out a towel. In the same spirit of ease of use, our toilet paper rolls hang from the open-ended hook style instead of the spring-loaded spindle that always takes two hands to change out a roll. I am sure these minor efficiency improvements will give me back many nanoseconds of usable time for the remainder of my life.

The en-suite baths on the main level required much more thought, construction time, and money. Thinking about being cost-effective and construction-efficient, these bath suites shared the same single-handed faucets, bath fans, lighting, sinks, counters, and medicine cabinets. The most significant difference was the vanity fronts and floor and wall surfaces.

I wanted extra light for the bath suites and placed two vertical LED light bars on both sides of the 6-foot vanities. I am struck by how dimly lighted many bathrooms are. As I've observed my wife applying makeup in various hotels and homes over the years, I've seen that top lighting can be dim and cause downward shadows. Nor am I a fan of mirrors with lights built in behind the glass, as the light is generally too dim, and your eyes are looking into the brighter-lit edge of light coming toward you. Akin to theatrical makeup mirrors, placing vertical lights on each side of the mirror more evenly and comfortably illuminates both sides of your face. Whether you're delicately applying eyeliner or going on a blackhead hunt, it's far easier if you can see what you're doing. I had seriously toyed with a third vertical light in the middle of the vanities that would be brightly illuminated. I concluded that while the facial lighting brilliance would be on par with an operating room, there's just a point where there's

too much light. Two 24” light bars are plenty and also fully illuminate the bathroom.

Next to the lights, I returned to a time when medicine cabinets were standard in American bathrooms. Today, few new homes have them. There are a couple of reasons for that. The first is cost. It’s much easier to glue a mirror, which can also serve as a sink backsplash. The other reason is that a big expansive mirror makes the room look bigger. But let’s talk convenience. Seeing brushes, creams, shavers, and pills at eye level is lovely, and gets rid of counter clutter.

Medicine cabinets can be wall-hung and will protrude out about 4 inches. Having the luxury of building a house from scratch, you can frame in recesses to slide the cabinets into so they are almost flush with the wall. And here’s a HUGE TIP: I wisely heeded the horror stories from several experts. Ensure the medicine cabinet door is high enough to open above the faucet. This is an often overlooked problem resulting in a time-consuming fix to cut out drywall and tile and move the cabinet up or buy lower faucets. Happily, ours clear the faucet top by one inch.

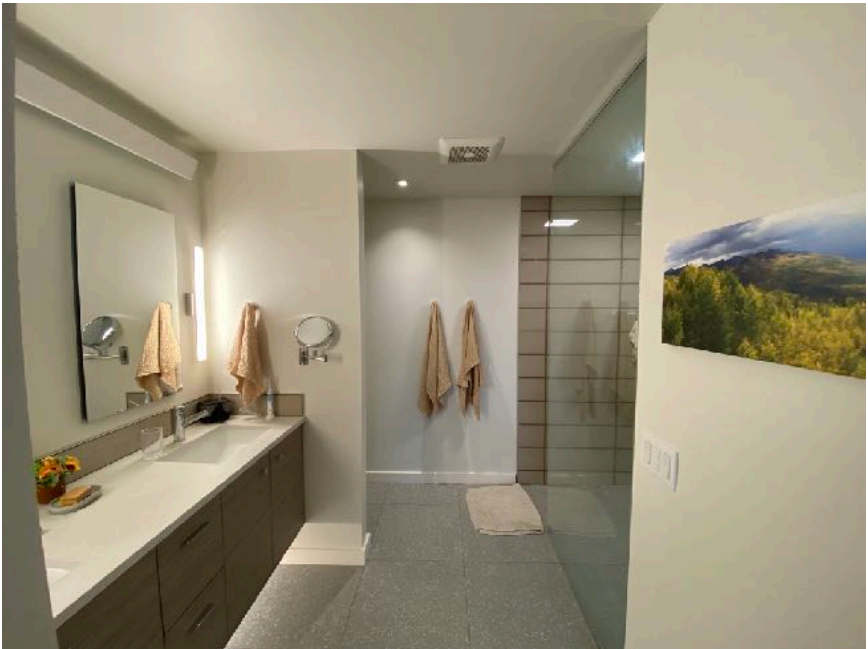
The Kohler medicine cabinets I purchased were mirrored on the front and back of the door and even in the back of the cabinet. A slightly fancier model I passed on also had an outlet for charging toothbrushes and shavers — less counter clutter. Like the heated steering wheels in our cars that I didn’t think we needed and now wouldn’t want to part with, I’ll always go with inside mirrored cabinets—they’re amazingly functional.

There was no question that the vanity counters would be a solid surface. We looked at both stone and artificial quartz products. We settled on a Caesarstone product called Cloudburst, a lightly toned white with a semi-matte surface. We chose a surface that we’d be comfortable with for both master baths, the mudroom, and a wall cap in the garage.

We went with graceful rectangular reverse arc under-mount white sinks, which sat atop floating vanities. Floating vanities, with the bottom of the cabinet hovering about a foot above the floor, give you less storage space, but having more cubic inches doesn’t always make it much more useable. The dual medicine cabinets make a huge

difference in storage and convenience, so losing a little space to gain some architectural class was a fair trade-off. And let's face it, storing stuff back under the plumbing under the sinks is pretty much dead storage. However, I improved that by building a roll-out drawer inside the cabinet. This makes the underneath storage remarkably undead.

From the get-go, in thinking about the cool look of a floating vanity, I had always planned to put LED tape lighting underneath it. The look is fantastic, even during the day, but the magic trick comes at night. Earlier, I had discussed whether or not to have a door dividing the bedroom from the bath. With the open bath design, turning on the under vanity lights provides enough gentle, indirect light to navigate and use the bathroom without much light spilling into the bedroom. If middle-of-the-night bathroom trips are part of the pattern, they can be turned on for safety or even left on as a nightlight, providing quiet illumination of the floor.



A bright and cheerful bathroom. LED tape lighting under the vanity can be turned on for a late-night glow to make the bathroom safely navigable. The heated floor includes a curbless shower.

I took the LED tape lighting one step further when encountering one of my first happy accidents during home construction. One day,

I was walking through the newly completed framing of our south suite. Standing in what was to be our shower, I looked at the exterior sidelight window I had placed to provide light into the stairwell coming up from the garage. The shower wall was designed to be solid inside the stairway. It occurred to me that if we reframed for a 2' by 4' frosted window in that wall, it would allow indirect light into what would typically be a dark interior room. I took it one step further by pulling wire to feed a length of LED tape that would light up the frosted glass at night. It's switched to come on with the under vanity lighting, and the effect always draws admiring comments. Furthermore, it gives us a tremendous visual warmth when in the bathroom.



The deep, curbless shower stays warm without a door. The frosted window lets in daylight, and LED tape creates a glow at night. The sill is an extra piece of Caesarstone from the slab used for the vanity countertops and holds Costco-sized products.

There's visual warmth, and then there's warmth, warmth. One luxury frill I splurged on was laying down Warmup floor heaters in both suite baths before tiling. It's a nice feel on cold mornings, and the wifi enabled iPhone-like controller gives you lots of programming capability. And while we're down here on the floor, another luxury touch I added was a curbless shower in our south

suite. Space permitted an oversized walk-in shower. I had designed one about the same size for our Vail expansion and put shower heads opposing each other on each wall. Imagine showering like you're in a carwash. Dueling shower heads are entirely over-rated, as are those five-figure shower walls. A much tinier but classy luxury is running the bathroom tile into the shower without a lip (curb). There is nothing to trip on, and it is easier to clean. Some figuring is needed regarding drain placement and ensuring the underfloor slopes toward the drain and not back into the bathroom. You see this more commonly in European bathrooms. With that oversized shower, we installed a single glass wall panel with simply an open walk-thru without a door. Our crew was dubious about not having a door, but the shower holds plenty of heat, and not having the door is one less thing to clean and one more potential hazard to avoid for us in the future.

Finally, the last upgrade item installed was a high-quality shower system. I went with a Hansgrohe dual unit. There's one temperature handle that you can set to hold a constant temperature. A small handle above it switches from a high-mounted shower head to a handheld one on an adjustable up/down sliding bar. We use both depending on if it's a quick rinse or full dowse. Furthermore, a removable shower head with a hose helps in cleaning. Whenever we've had showers with a single high wall head, we swapped it out for a hose with a detachable head.