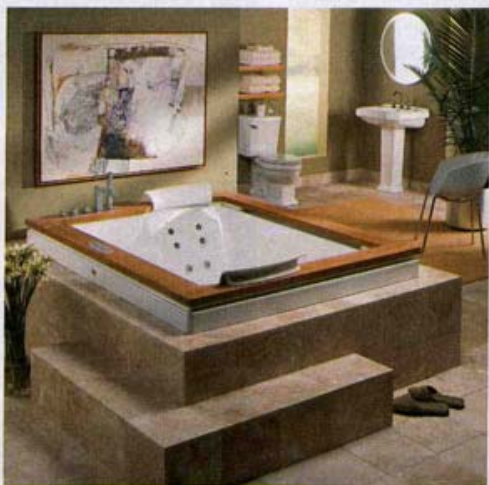


Modern Times: Bathrooms Become Hi-Tech Oasis

By Charlene Arsenault

In today's troublesome economy, many homeowners are making every room count when the time comes to renovate. Manufacturers are responding to this need by upgrading a plethora of products for one of the most popular rooms in the house – the bathroom. Gone are the plain, oak vanities and seashell-shaped sinks. Today bathrooms are adding designs and accessories that transport this formerly utilitarian space into a new era of comfort, technology and fashion.

"No longer just the 'necessary room,' bathrooms are becoming destinations themselves," says Melanie Murphy of Redecorating by Melanie, in Reading (781.944.6119, redesignyourhome.com). "Clients want them to be restful, tranquil and spa-like or well-appointed and luxurious." Murphy, who specializes in interior design and room makeovers, says she likes to focus on making the bathroom



The two-person Fusion tub courtesy of CSN stores

comfortable and relaxing; she also believes it should be easy to maintain.

CSN Stores (800.593.5251, csnstores.com), a web retailer based out of Boston, ranks as one of the top e-tailers of home and office goods in the country. The company has 267 Web-based shops featuring everything from bathroom vanities to bedrooms and greenhouses to lighting.

According to Bridget Kelly, marketing director for CSN, there are a lot of new products on the market, but some of the most popular ones come from Blomus (blomus.com). These include soap dispensers, toothbrush holders, toilet brush holders, shower shelf, towel racks, robe hooks and much more. "Everything is stainless and a few feature porcelain accents, too," says Kelly. "Both are hot right now in bathrooms. Blomus fixtures bring a simple elegance to bathrooms, which makes them very inviting."

Bristol and Bath is a new line for CSN, too. They specialize in high design bathroom fixtures,

and have several forward thinking lines. "One that's particularly alluring is the Wave Collection," says Kelly, "which offers some of the most sophisticated designs in trendy bathroom décor. The floating, wall-mounted design of the Wave 103 Vanity Set provides a clean, simple elegance and the illusion of additional space."

Sinks have become pieces of artwork; modern designs are making these basins among the focal points of the room. Abbey Koplovitz is president of AbbeyK, Inc. (617.484.4490, abbeyk.com, oninteriordesign.com), a residential interior design and decorating firm in Belmont offering everything from color consulting to high-end, full service decorating. She says, "Vanities with legs with an unfitted look are popular. Vessel sinks have been popular for a while, but current trends involve natural luxurious materials such as limestone and onyx and exotic woods, such as wenge for bases. Vessels for the powder room as well as sinks and bathtubs made of malachite, onyx, sandstone and limestone are popular."

Murphy points out that many new designs address the busy family, or couple, that must share a bathroom. "I am seeing lots of doubles," says Murphy. "Lots of double sinks, double vanities, separate showers, baths and water closets."

"Another really exciting area," says Koplovitz, "are high-tech applications – items that glow. These are fairly new on the market and all the rage. Robern has a really neat new medicine cabinet with a night light built into the door and I am quite fond of these."

For decades, most bathrooms had either a tub or larger shower. Now it is becoming standard to have both in the room – with the tub taking a prominent position in an alcove or under a window.

Mary Courville of Mary Courville Designs (781.721.1934, marycourvilledesigns.com) in Winchester, points out such cutting edge products as the Kohler DTV II Custom Showering Experience, which combines music, lighting, chromatherapy and steam control through a programmable digital interface. The Water Tile Ambient Rain Overhead Showering Panel has 54 nozzle spray heads with a light panel that changes to different soothing colors, and MTI Whirlpools makes a Stereo H2O model with built-in surround sound speakers. Other amenities include the Gentle Ped Foot Spa for soaking feet towel warming racks that are placed close to the toilet, so as to warm the seat, and hand-held showerheads, she says, have become very popular.

Courville also mentions new trends toward using natural materials in the shower, such smooth sea pebbles used as tile for the floor.

"It has a soothing, almost massaging feel," she says. "Teak wood on the floor is warm and soft on the feet." Sinks, too, are more "furniture like," made of stone counter tops, and custom vanities are made of wood. Kelly echoes the trend toward teak, and also mentions a shift to the "straight from nature" look, which adds minimal effort to mother nature's designs to make it functional and beautiful. A good example is the Cole and Company Custom Collection Copper Sink with Scallop Design.

Once unimaginative, Kelly says that the bathroom design field went from few decorative, interesting products to an explosion of affordable designs that are unique and expressive, and sometimes can be installed without having to call a plumber. Courville says people are not only spending more money on the finishing touches in the bathroom, but on elaborate storage systems and layouts.

It certainly wouldn't be a bathroom without the unavoidable toilet, so Koplovitz introduces that as part of the discussion. Both she and Courville champion the Toto name and its GMAX flushing system. "I like anything by Toto," says Koplovitz. "It's good flushing technology that avoids clogs. Also look for dual flush toilets that allow you to select water flow depending on what's being flushed. These decrease water usage."

Courville adds, "[Toto] also makes the Washlet toilet seat that has a hands-free auto flush and auto seat lifting, as well as a self-cleaning nozzle that extends to release a warm, soothing stream of aerated water."

Women, especially, are focusing on wanting to personalize the bath and powder rooms. "They see them as a chance to 'show off' and experiment on a small scale without a lot of commitment," she says. "You can quickly change the wall color and the vanity in the bathroom and change the whole room,

whereas similar changes to a dining or living room might necessitate painters and a whole new set of furniture. New bathrooms also increase the value and overall appeal of the home, something that's particularly important given today's challenging home-selling environment."

Koplovitz echoes, "People want a dramatic wow factor. They don't just want to visit a spa or fancy hotel. They want their bathrooms to be all about luxury. You can have it right in your home." She also reminds us that folks are more environmentally aware these days, and going green applies to the bathroom, too. One company with a strong commitment to this movement is Waterfall. "Their products are not only green, but beautiful, too," says Koplovitz. "What makes them green is that they are made of formaldehyde-free MDF and painted with an ultra low-VOC water-based formulation. I love it."

Kelly touts the Second Chance Collection from Bristol and Bath as one of the lines that is not only bringing newer elements into bathroom designs (different types of glass, marble and granite), but really "put the E in Eco-Friendly." Innovative design has long been the hallmark for Michael Graves and Delta, which concentrate on chic, modern angles to fixtures. "The faucets," says Kelly, "have smooth lines and are simple but not starkly modern, so they work with many existing bathroom styles. Graves' work shows a new trend – glass and crystal handles on fixtures, which add significant luxury and character to a bathroom."

Whether your bathroom is simply a place to get in and out – or a powder room you visit to pamper and relax – the key is in the choices that abound. Where once a toilet and tub reigned supreme, homeowners now can add style, luxuries and even a little bit of fun. ■

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