

FIX IT UP!

Bruce Turner

Bathroom Fashion Trends

Last time, I talked about why bathrooms wear out so much faster than the rest of the house. Water is what the bathroom is all about, yet it's also the enemy – a leak in a tile joint that goes undetected for years can rot not only the wall behind it but also the floor underneath. When we open up a wall to do a dry rot repair, often we find widespread damage that requires new flooring, tub or shower replacement and more. It's not uncommon at that point for the homeowner to throw up his hands and say, what the heck, let's just remodel the whole bathroom.

That's a pain, but it's also an opportunity to do something really special for your home. Call it a societal trend or just a taste for the good life, but people are spending more time in the bathroom today. It's no longer a place to go just to do your business and return to what you were doing. It's a destination, a place to hang out and relax and let the stresses of the day drift away. And with the increased time in there comes a desire to make a fashion statement. We are having a world of fun doing bathrooms and showers today, because we have so many more design alternatives than we did just a few years ago.

The walls alone offer limitless possibilities. Today we're using natural stone, ceramic, porcelain, glass tiles and even tile made of abalone shell mosaic and other gorgeously exotic stuff. My new favorite is glass tile, which comes in every color under the rainbow and a variety of shapes and sizes, and allows you to really get creative. Overall, the trend is towards a less formal appearance and more natural materials. We're still using a lot of marble, but today it's much more likely to be honed marble rather than polished – it's more natural-looking.

The biggest revolution, however, has been in what comes out of the walls. Visit a bathroom-design showroom and you won't believe the incredible variety of fixtures and systems on the market today. The overhead shower set is being supplanted by what I call the "human car wash" – a battery of spray heads that will soak you top to bottom and stem to stern with massaging jets of water. It's surprisingly not over-the-top expensive, although all additional plumbing labor gets costly. Adjusting the water temperature with knobs or handles is old-fashioned – today lots of my customers are installing thermostatic valves that allow you to pre-set the water temperature. Kohler has just come out with an all-digital shower system with fully integrated circuitry that looks like a stereo system. Not a handle in sight – you just push the buttons.

The arrival of the high-tech shower coincides with another trend – those huge, deck-mounted whirlpool bathtubs may be slipping out of style. I think it's the result of the "graying" of our population – older adults don't party or wash the kids in those big tubs anymore, and senior citizens aren't enchanted with the idea of climbing out of a deep jacuzzi tub. So they're choosing to replace tubs with showers, especially curbless showers that allow wheelchair access. (They're also great for people who are just sick of stubbing their toes on the curb.) And even folks who prefer tubs are replacing the noisy whirlpool tubs with big, quiet, luxurious soaking tubs.

If you have to replace your bathroom, it's quite an investment in time and money. But you can also have a whole lot of fun creating a wonderful getaway space that will give you years of pleasure and service. And it'll probably increase the value of your property by considerably more than you invest.

Bruce Turner is president of TurnerBuilt, Inc. in Half Moon Bay. He can be reached at bturner@turnerbuilt.com.