The Perfect Master Bath

An architect's advice on turning a good bath into a great bath—without breaking the bank

BY STEPHEN VANZE

We've all seen them. They appear in magazines at the checkout line and the convenience-store counter, just above the reach of small children. The pictorial spreads, full of glossy color photos, make you ache with desire. We see them at friends' houses (at least the friends we know well enough to let us see them). Some of our friends even carry pictures of them in their wallets.

What are they? I'm talking about big, beautiful master baths with marble floors, marble counters, gold-plated sinks and faucets, showers that produce water from every direction and floors that are slightly warm to the touch. These baths have features that you never knew existed but now you cannot live without. They make you contemplate a home-equity loan and conferences with architects and builders.

Here's a reality check: These showcases can become very big and very expensive.

Start by analyzing the space

The next time you are looking at a picture of the bathroom you've always wanted, try figuring out how big that bathroom is. A typical tub deck is at least 3½ ft. wide and almost 7 ft. long. A two-sink counter is almost certainly 6 ft. long and 2 ft. deep. The shower is probably 4 ft. square, and the space in the middle, with the chair and the small dressing table, is around 5 ft. wide and 8 ft. long.

This room is 11 ft. by 17 ft. To get a sense of how big this space is, start measuring some other rooms in your house. This dream bathroom likely will be the biggest room in your house. It is probably bigger than most of your bedrooms, a bit narrower than your dining room and about the size of your eat-in kitchen.



Sculptural elements distinguish a bath. *In a house with Craftsman-style detailing, this custom double-bowl lavatory with matching mirrors echoes similar elements in adjacent rooms.*



Now do a quick check on the cost of fixtures and materials. Check the price of a cast-iron whirlpool tub (about $3,000) and the incredibly beautiful sink faucet you see in that magazine picture (it easily can cost $900). These costs are on top of the marble that ranges from $70 to $80 per sq. ft. or molded tiles that cost $25 per tile. A luxuriously appointed large master bathroom, built in an existing space, will end up costing $25,000 to $40,000, as well as taking up about one-third of your second floor. For this price tag, you could have several fairly nice vacations in hotels with bathrooms that sexy.

Of course, there's the other extreme: the practical, minimally sized bathroom that has everything you need but nothing you want. This room might be the master bathroom you have now: one sink and a tub/shower combination with the toilet next to it.

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It is only 8 ft. sq., has inexpensive but functional fixtures and 4x4 tile, and serves its purpose to the bare minimum. But in that room, you don't want to lounge and enjoy getting ready in the morning. And you're certainly not going to show it to your friends.

So how do you strike a balance? Where is the middle ground that satisfies your need to be pampered but doesn't involve the creation of the bathroom that ate your bank account and house?

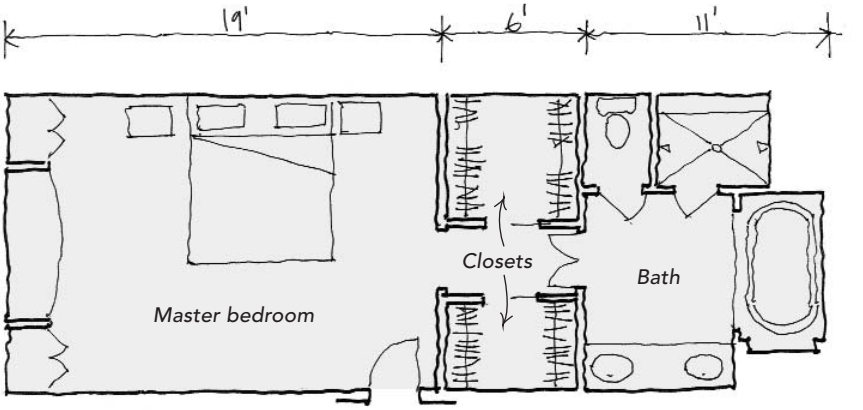
First, you need to remember the essential functions and elements of the master bathroom. They are washing, bathing and using the toilet. But instead of fulfilling just these obvious and minimal requirements, the master bathroom can be an extension of your personal living quarters, part of your bedroom.

The master suite includes a sleeping area, a dressing area and the bath. The master bathroom is a place where you can perform your daily toilette in a pleasant environment that allows you and, if attached, your significant other to enjoy preparing for the day ahead or to relax while getting ready for bed. In much the same way that the kitchen has become more than just a room to prepare meals and more of a place that accommodates the gathering of the whole family, the master bath has become more than just a bathroom in recent years. How do you make this room a pleasant place to start the day without breaking the bank? I have six suggestions that can help you to plan that perfect bath.



Create a space for each function. *You can give the bath a roomlike feel by organizing its functions around a central space. Here, the tub alcove and recessed lavatory counter show two ways to apply this rule.*



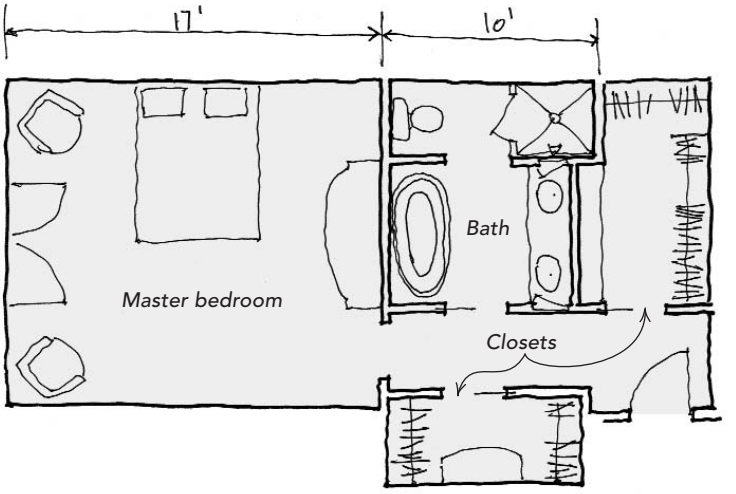


HALLWAY CENTERED

The door between the master bedroom and the master bath is usually open. Therein lies opportunity. Centering the hallway can focus the view on attractive elements in each room.

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HALLWAY TO THE SIDE

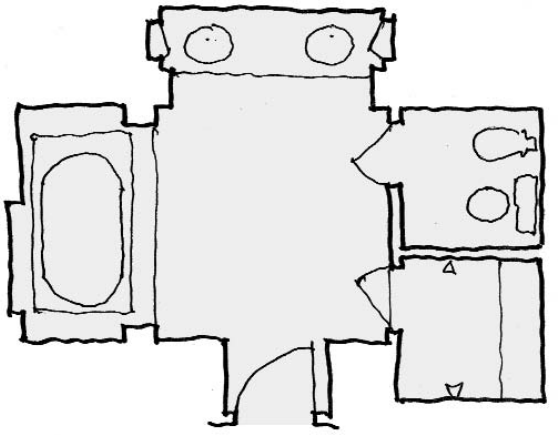
If the entry to the master suite passes by the bathroom, the designer has a different sort of opportunity: Create a pair of discrete dressing rooms separate from the bedroom.



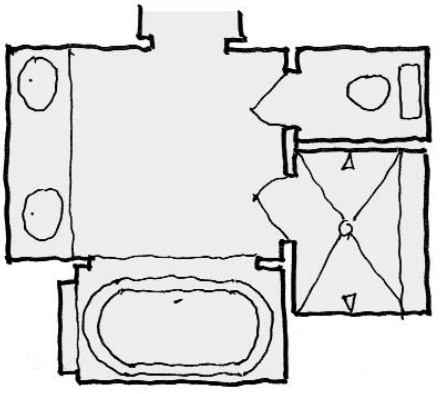
"Make your bathroom a room. Don't line the fixtures against the wall."

TRY TO CONTROL GROWTH

If the bath has to grow to accommodate function, keep it to a minimum. For example, in these two central-square plans, adding a bidet to the water closet steals a bit of space from the shower.



Bath with bidet



Bath without bidet



In a small bath, fixtures take on great prominence. *A cast-iron tub with faceted corners surrounded by tumbled marble tile distinguishes this bath.*

6 DESIGN TIPS

1 The bath and the bedroom need a comfortable connection

Consider the bathroom in the context of your entire master suite and bedroom floor. The relationship of master bedroom, dressing area, bathroom and entry into the suite from the hallway should be the foremost planning principle. Hire an architect or other design professional to help you. On p. 85 are two generic plans of master-bedroom suites. The first shows a bedroom entered from the hall. From the bedroom, you pass through a dressing area into the master bathroom, making the bathroom the farthest space from the entry and, therefore, the most private (top drawing, p. 85).

The second plan shows the entrance to the master suite via a dressing room with a bath off a vestibulelike space. While making the bath less private, it allows for one half of a couple to get up, get washed, get dressed and leave without bothering the lucky, still-sleeping other member of the couple (bottom drawing, p. 85).

In both schemes, the baths are not the biggest spaces; the bedrooms are. They are big enough but not too big compared with the other spaces. They are adequate and comfortable without being opulent.

2 Designate spaces for specific functions

Design a specific space for each of the most essential functions. For washing, design a contained counter area (photo pp. 82-83) or a wall against which a sculptural pedestal sink can be displayed. The same holds true for the tub, shower and toilet area. Decide if you really need a separate tub and shower or if a combined/shower tub, or even just a shower, will serve your purposes. Decide if the toilet needs its own room or whether it can be part of the open bathroom.

Drawings: Sarah Walther

Where fixtures are more artistic, keep some wall space clear so that they can shine.

A toilet with its own room does require more space. If space is limited, incorporating a well-designed toilet as a beautiful element in the bathroom itself can help to make the bath seem bigger and airier.

3 Make your bathroom a room

Don't line the fixtures against the wall. Instead, organize different functional areas around a central space, and give this space a roomlike feel (photo pp. 84-85). Decide on the minimal space you need to move around in, and try not to let that grow. On the facing page are two plans where each function is in its own space, with each organized around a central square.

4 The bath should be an extension of the bedroom

When the bathroom door is open, which it usually is, what do you see from the bedroom? Do you look at a beautiful tub in an arched alcove with a small window facing your thoughtfully manicured backyard? Or do you see a toilet with the seat up? Conversely, carefully consider what you see from the bathroom (photo right, p. 85). While lying in the tub enjoying a good soak, is your main focus the hamper full of dirty clothes, or is it across the bedroom out the window? Use the bathroom to make the bedroom bigger and vice versa.

"When you are done planning, look over your bathroom plan. It should be smaller than your bedroom and, ideally, smaller than your dining room."

5 Use compatible fixtures and materials

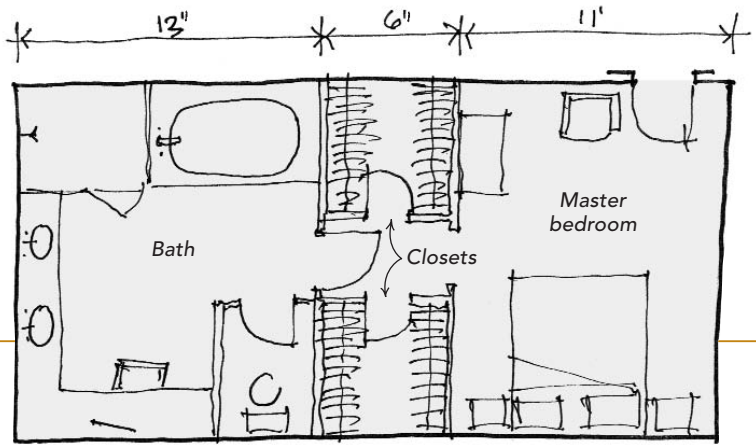
Carefully select fixtures and materials in keeping with your tastes and with the essential character of the house. If you live in a 1920s bungalow, stick with a tile that reflects that period, or use tongue-and-groove beadboard that picks up other features of the home. But don't make the bathroom the most nicely appointed room in the home. Although it is a place where you spend a lot of time, you entertain there only infrequently. Hire a designer sympathetic to your tastes and to your home. Don't believe expensive means better. Many beautiful, inexpensive light fixtures, faucets and plumbing fixtures can be used in lieu of the most expensive.

If you fall in love with a particular fixture outside your price range, ask yourself why you like it. Once you identify the qualities that attract you, you can take them to a design professional who can help you to find a similar fixture in your price range.

6 Keep it in proper proportion

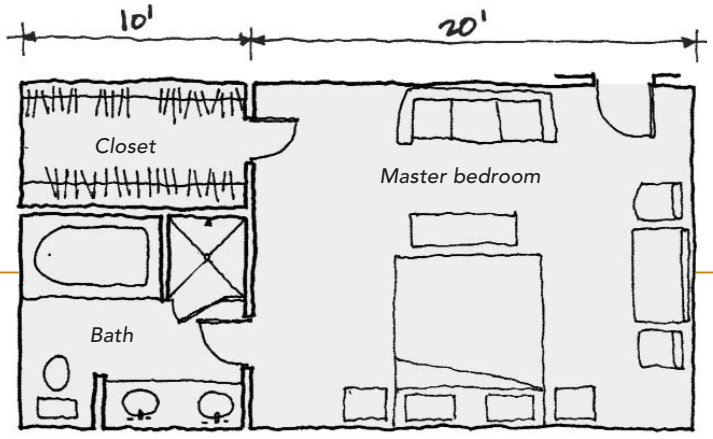
Always consider that your design response is proportional to the problem. If you have decided that your tub is a little too small, don't take away from the master bedroom to make the tub bigger. When you are done planning, look over your bathroom plan. It should be smaller than your bedroom and, ideally, smaller than your dining room. Although you should enjoy being in the bathroom, it should not be the place where you stay all day because the rest of the house is so depressing by comparison. If your available space for the master suite is 15 ft. by 30 ft., do not do this (top drawing). Instead, do this (bottom drawing).

If you follow these steps, you will have a master bathroom that reflects your style, that enhances your house and that gives you a reason to get up in the morning. □



DON'T LET THE BATH TAKE OVER

Maintain balance in a master suite by keeping the bath smaller than the bedroom. It should be a pleasant space to be in, but the bathroom shouldn't put the rest of the house to shame.



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