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## Cover story: Cleaning up the look of bathrooms

By Michele Lerner SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES - The Washington Times Thursday, December 29, 2011

Sleek is in, at least in bathrooms. Where bathrooms once were designed with ornate cabinetry and a mix of finishes and flourishes, these days, modern, clean lines and clear glass are trendy.

Although master baths in high-end homes are still spacious, the acres of empty floor space and yards of tile decking around the soaking tub have shrunk. In many cases, the soaking tub has disappeared.

"People are being smarter with space these days," said Bill Millholland, executive vice president of Case Design/Remodeling in Bethesda. "They still want large bathrooms, but the approach has changed. In particular, the focus has shifted from the soaking tub or whirlpool tub to the shower, because that's what people use constantly."

Mr. Millholland said the decision to keep a separate tub often is based on the size of the bathroom.

"A lot of people would rather have a 4-by-5-foot shower than a 3-by-3-foot shower and a soaking tub," Mr. Millholland said.

Nadia Subaran, senior designer and co-owner of Aidan Design in Bethesda, said some homeowners are opting to remove the soaking tub entirely, at least in the master bath.

"Homeowners are doing really lovely showers with interesting tile work visible through glass doors," Ms. Subaran said. "Frameless glass doors have replaced frosted glass and glass-block enclosures.

"People don't want opaque, clunky-looking glass anymore. They are going for modern, minimalist looks."

Patricia Tetro, principal of Bowa in McLean, said homeowners request rain showerheads and handheld showers more than the body sprays that were popular a few years ago.

"We put in a bench in the master shower and sometimes a shaving step to rest your foot on," Ms. Tetro said. "We even sometimes put in a 'toe tester,' which is a tiny little faucet by the shower door that you can use to test the water temperature before you get into the shower."

Homeowners who choose to have a soaking tub or whirlpool tub focus more on the depth of the tub instead of the surrounding deck. Ms. Tetro said that free-standing, sculptural tubs are popular.

One luxury that many homeowners choose is heated floors, and now homeowners can add heated floors and heated tile walls to their showers, she said.

"You can set the heat with a timer so that the heat is ready when you get into the shower," Ms. Tetro said.

Some homeowners extend the tile work from their showers to their walls.

"Tile walls are easy to clean, but they also offer the illusion of taller ceilings when they extend to the ceiling," Ms. Subaran said. "Tile gives off a reflective light, and continuing the tile allows you to minimize the number of different elements in the bathroom."

Mr. Millholland said the almost limitless choice of tiles can be challenging for some homeowners, while others mix and match tiles on the floor and walls and in the shower.

"Most people are looking for a warmer look these days, choosing natural stone, porcelain and ceramic tile," Ms. Tetro said. "Each bath is unique and it makes it even more interesting that there are so many different sizes of tile available now, even things like 6-by-16-inch planks of tile and detail pieces."

The trend for bathroom floors is to use larger such as 12-by-18- or 18-by-18-inch tiles, Mr. Millholland said.

"The larger format gives a more modern look and has the advantage of fewer grout lines for easier cleaning, he said. "Powder rooms are the exception, though, with most people opting for hardwood flooring that extends from the rest of the main level instead of tile."

Ms. Subaran said porcelain tile flooring is popular because of its durability and affordability.

"You can get a very tight grout joint with porcelain, which is great for maintenance and for the modern look," Ms. Subaran said.

Sleek modern lines are trendy for bathroom vanities, too.

"It's pretty much a given now that vanities are 36 inches tall, more like a kitchen cabinet instead of the low vanities people used to put in," Ms. Tetro said. "They look more like furniture, often with feet underneath and are painted and stained."

Mr. Millholland said the old days of a vanity that is basically just a box around the plumbing are gone.

"It's all about storage now, with as many drawers as possible," Mr. Millholland said. "The detailing is very flat, with sharp corners to show off the wood. Sustainable woods like bamboo are popular, too."

In two recent bath remodeling projects, Ms. Subaran replaced a linen closet with a built-in cabinet.

"A cabinet can be more efficient and use up less space, plus you can put in a hamper and add racks to the door for medicines and small items," Ms. Subaran said.

Vanity tops often are marble, granite or an engineered stone, such as Silestone.

"Marble and limestone don't work well in kitchens because they can get stained, so a lot of people like to use them for the bathroom vanity," Ms. Subaran said. "Warmer palettes are popular, too, with creamier colors and warmer white marble."

Mr. Millholland said adding a mirror to the inside of a medicine cabinet is popular at the moment. Electrical outlets inside a cabinet or drawer also add convenience.

For fixtures, polished chrome and brushed nickel are more popular than bronze or gold-toned faucets and handles.

Ms. Tetro said some homeowners are installing new toilets with an accessory that functions as a bidet and can be warmed, reducing the need for both toilet and bidet.

Some relatively new design elements work well for specific problems in a bath, such as a lack of light or a bulky radiator.

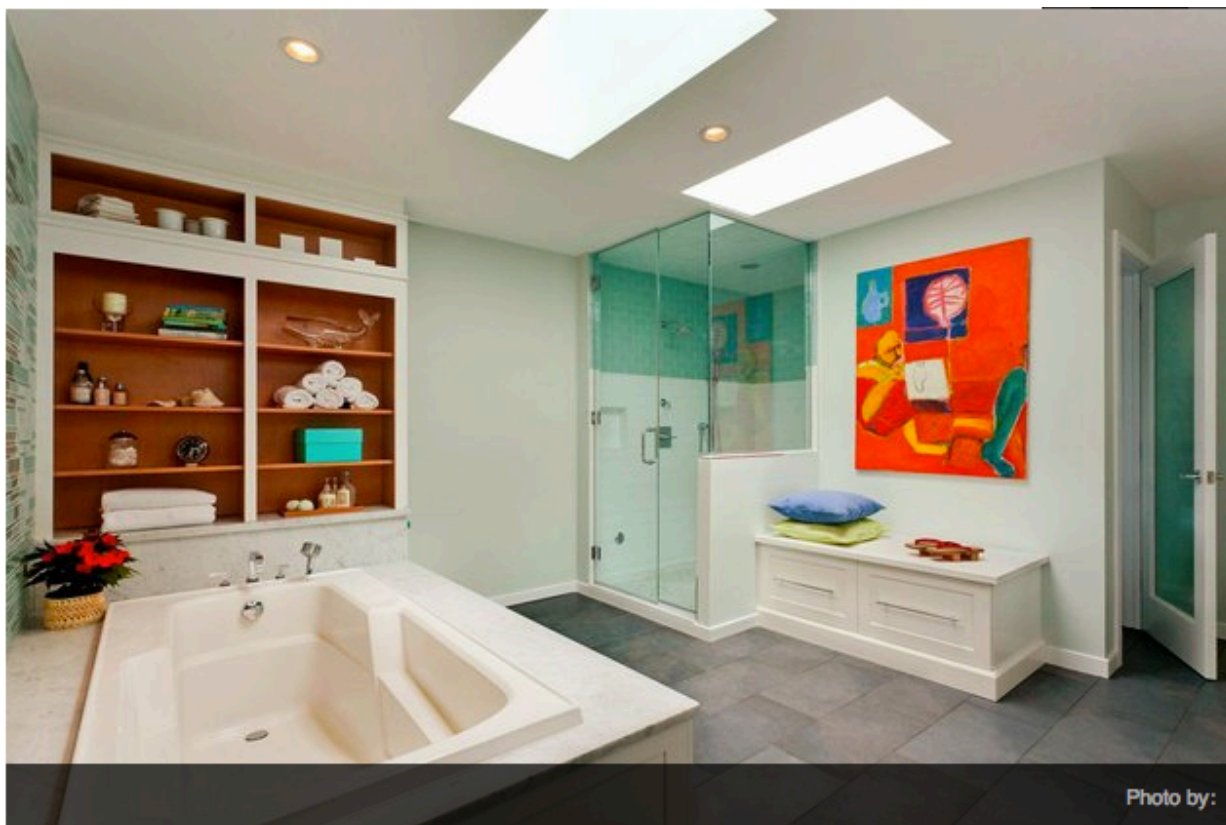
"'Landlocked' baths can be given natural light by using 'sun tunnels,' which work kind of like a skylight but are much less expensive to install," Mr. Millholland said.

Ms. Subaran recommended using new, almost sculptural radiators that can replace standard radiators with modern heat conductors that also work as towel warmers.

If you don't have the budget for a total bathroom makeover, Mr. Millholland, said just adding a bowed shower-curtain rod in a small bath provides a modern look and a little more space in the shower.



Courtesy of Case Design/Remodeling Many homeowners are forgoing having a tub in the bathroom and are instead using tile work and frameless glass doors to highlight the shower.



Courtesy of Aidan Design Sleek, clean lines are the most recent trend in today's bathrooms.