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Glam Up the Bath With the Right Lighting

Finally, bathrooms are getting their due in the design world. Kitchens have enjoyed luxury upgrades for many years, but the bath has always seemed somehow less important. It has been seen as a purely functional space where you shower, shave, apply make-up and use the toilet. Why spend money here when there are lots of other rooms that felt more deserving? Now homeowners, in much greater numbers, are realizing that the bath can be a soothing retreat, a little oasis away from the chaos of day-to-day living. It has become the one room in the house in which you can lock the door and keep the rest of the world out without feeling guilty, at least for a little while.

The Task at Hand

I feel that well-designed lighting is of the utmost importance in the bathroom. Let's take task lighting for instance. More often than not, people use inadequate lighting techniques for that much-needed illumination at the sink.

How many times have we seen a dramatic photograph of a vanity with a recessed downlight directly over the basin? It makes for a great shot, but imagine yourself standing at the mirror with that harsh light hitting the top of your head. Remember when, as a child, you would hold a flashlight under your chin to create a scary face? Well, the same thing happens, only in reverse. Long, dark shadows appear under your eyes, nose and chin. This type of lighting is extremely bad for applying make-up or shaving and can make for a very depressing start to your day.

Another typical arrangement is the use of one luminaire (this is what the lighting industry calls light fixtures to confuse consumers) surface-mounted above the mirror. This is only slightly better than a recessed light. At best, it illuminates the top half of the face, letting the bottom half fall into shadow. This is an especially hard light by which to shave, as there are only so many ways to tilt your head to catch the proper light.

For the best task lighting, use two luminaires—flanking the mirror area above the sink—to provide the necessary cross-illumination (see photo right). The principle of cross-illumination on the vertical axis originated in the theater, where actors and actresses applied make-up in front of mirrors surrounded by bare bulbs screwed into porcelain sockets. In imitation of this technique, luminaire manufacturers started to put vanity light bars on the market about 30 years ago. Unfortunately, soon homes everywhere were sporting the now ubiquitous three-bulb brass or chrome bar above the mirror. Remember, these bars work best when mounted on each side of the mirror. A third bar could be mounted above the mirror, but it is not necessary for good task lighting. Any luminaire mounted above the mirror by itself is not an adequate source of work light.



A more recent trend in providing cross-illumination is to wall mount translucent luminaires at eye-level on either side of the sink. These can flank a hanging mirror or be mounted on a full-wall mirror. Many new, well-designed North American and European luminaires are perfect for this type of application. To protect the homeowner from electric shock, specifiers should ensure fixtures located this close to water are installed with an instantaneous circuit shutoff, called a GFI (ground fault interrupter).

Many builders and architects have a propensity for installing fluorescent or incandescent light soffits fitted with either acrylic diffusers or egg-crate louvers over vanity areas. They too mostly illuminate the top half of a person's face. A white or glossy counter can help reflect some light from below by bouncing illumination up onto the lower part of the face. You are cross lighting from top to bottom in this instance. This is not the optimum solution but a passable substitute if vertical cross-illumination is impossible to install. Remember, the more stuff that ends up on the counter, such as towels and containers, the less reflective surface there will be. And we all know how tidy our clients can be.

While the task area at the vanity is the most critical to illuminate correctly, lighting other areas of the bath bear your design consideration as well. Tubs and showers need a good task light too. For this purpose, recessed luminaires with white opal diffusers are commonly used and relatively effective. One drawback is that many of the units on the market project approximately 2 in. below the ceiling line and may not be visually comfortable.

Those who are sensitive to bright light might prefer a luminaire with a lens that is flush or recessed into the ceiling. However, with such a fully recessed unit, the upper third of the shower or tub area will end up being a little dimmer, but these luminaires do reduce glare and allow bulbs of higher wattages to be used. Some companies, such as Lucifer, Juno and Iris, have developed a watertight, recessed, adjustable luminaire that uses an MR16 lamp. This allows the light to be focused.

Make sure that all luminaires in the bath are listed for damp locations by CSA, UL, ETL or other approved testing laboratories. You don't want the fixtures to start to show signs of rusting.

Another direction that has been an option for wet location lighting is fiber optics and LEDs (light emitting diodes). In the case of fiber optics, the light source is remotely located. These

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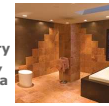
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fiber optic luminaires can provide illumination without the danger of electric shock. LEDs have recently been introduced as part of a chromatherapy movement that allows homeowners to choose what color of light they want to be surrounded by. A few companies offer showerheads and whirlpool tubs with color-changing abilities. It's fun, but when I dial in the red light, I feel like I am in the colorized version of the shower scene in *Psycho*.

Sexing Up Fluorescent

The fluorescent option is important today. California is on the leading edge of requiring homeowners (as well as commercial spaces) to be more energy efficient. As a San Francisco-based lighting designer, I have been dealing with fluorescent light sources in the design, construction or remodeling of residential bathrooms (and kitchens) for many years. I know that the rest of the country has been less than enthusiastic about using fluorescent sources, but as we see the effects of global warming and the rising cost of oil, the option of using energy-efficient lighting becomes something worth considering.

I am an advocate of stealth fluorescent lighting. Let's face it, fluorescent lamps (the lighting industry's term for a light bulb to further confuse the consumer) are ugly. The compact fluorescents (CFLs) tend to look like long alien fingers or swirly soft ice cream cones. No matter how wonderful the quality or color of the light, the moment a client sees one, they have a negative reaction. It comes from all those years of going to school or working under banks of fluorescents that hummed, buzzed, flickered and made us look like Shrek.

Fortunately, the color temperatures of many of today's fluorescent lamps are very flattering to skin tones. In response to color-rendition criticism, most manufacturers have introduced recessed and surface-mounted luminaires that use lamps with color-correcting phosphors, including the newer CFLs. These lamps not only provide greatly improved color rendering, but they are also at least three times more energy efficient than incandescent lamps. The 13-watt version, for example, produces an amount of illumination close to a 60-watt incandescent bulb.

Many of today's luminaires use two 13-watt or one 26-watt quad lamp that puts out as much light as a 120-watt incandescent source. Because one of the color temperatures available in the CFL is close to that of an incandescent (2700K lamps), both types of light sources can be used in one bath without creating disconcerting color variations.

Still, people instantly hate them when they see them. This is where the stealth part comes in. I simply hide the fluorescent lamps inside luminaires where they can't be seen. When people can't see them, they don't instantly dislike them. I'll hide them in dish-shaped alabaster pendants, opaque indirect wall sconces and white Murano-glass vanity lights. Sneaky wins every time.

The advent of the electronic ballast eliminated the hum, but it must be specified, as magnetic ballasts still hum and are still available. Most CFL quad versions are quiet and have a rapid start-up. Dimming of CFLs is now a standard option. Specifying a luminaire with a two-wire ballast allows for easy replacement of an existing incandescent fixture with a fluorescent version.

A very exciting development by TCP (Technical Consumer Products Inc) is the introduction of a standard-socket, CFL that can be dimmed with an incandescent dimmer. This means luminaires that normally use incandescent sources can be retrofitted with fluorescent lamps without changing the socket, adding a dimming ballast or using a special fluorescent dimmer. The name of this amazing lamp is the Spring Lamp.

These advances, along with the improved colors, long life and quiet operation, make fluorescent lighting worth a second look. Come on, you can do it!

Make Me Pretty

Indirect lighting in a bathroom adds a warm overall glow to the space. It softens the shadows on people's faces and has the benefits of Botox without the pain. Wall sconces or cove lighting that direct light upward can provide a wonderful, gentle ambient illumination. Both of these can use miniature incandescent and halogen sources, LED or CFLs. The fluorescent choices not only comply with tighter energy restrictions but also provide comfortable low-maintenance light for the entire room. For bathrooms with higher ceilings, pendant-hung fixtures, such as the alabaster luminaire I mentioned earlier, can also be considered as a source of fill light.

Visualize

Along with this newfound need for ambient illumination comes an opportunity for accent lighting. Plants and art pieces (not affected by moisture) can be highlighted. This can add some dramatic lighting in a space that formerly was overlooked.

Window to the Sky

Often, skylights are installed to supplement or replace electric lighting during the daytime hours. Clear glass or acrylic skylights can project a hard beam of light, shaped like the skylight opening, onto the floor of the bath. Bronze-colored skylights will cast a dimmer version of the same shape, while a white opal acrylic skylight diffuses and softens the natural light, producing a more gentle light that fills the bath more completely. Existing clear or bronze skylights can be fitted with a white acrylic panel, frosted-glass window frame or a shade material to soften the incoming light.

All specified skylights should have ultraviolet filters to slow the deterioration or fading of materials caused by the sun's ultraviolet rays. If the light well is deep enough, low-maintenance recessed skylights using fluorescent or long-life incandescent lamps can be mounted between the diffusing material and the skylight. These inexpensive lamps can be used to keep the skylight from appearing as a dark recess in the ceiling at night.

Take a Powder

When people are entertaining, the room most frequently visited by their guests will likely be the powder room. This space can be treated differently than the other bathrooms. No serious tasks are going to be performed by guests. This is a place where people will wash their hands or check their hair and make-up before rejoining the soiree. If they come to shave, they are feeling a little too comfortable.

The lights here should just provide a flattering glow. Sometimes a pair of translucent luminaires on either side of the mirror or a single wall indirect sconce will do the trick. An accent light on a piece of art or flower arrangement will add a little dramatic punch. Put the various types of lights on dimmers to allow for flexible control over the illumination levels.

The Bottom Line

The most important thing to remember in lighting the bathroom is that good illumination for tasks is numero uno, because looking good is hard work.

Randall Whitehead is a nationally known lighting designer and author. He has written seven books on the subject including *Residential Lighting, A Practical Guide*. He has also appeared as a guest expert on HGTV, the Discovery Channel and CNN.