

Upgrading Your Bathroom? Get Spa Luxury, Ease, and Mobility

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More Americans want the spa experience in home bathrooms—heated towel racks, spacious showers with multiple heads, deep soaking tubs, luxe finishes. But as people age, bathroom safety and mobility become important, too.

Interior designers insist that homeowners don't need to sacrifice beauty and comfort for safety. What they're really saying: think beyond the space-gobbling, walk-in fiberglass bathtubs advertised on late-night TV.

Universal Design

Sarah Barnard, a Los Angeles–based interior designer and owner of [Sarah Barnard Design](#), said it can be difficult at first to talk with her clients about adding mobility-friendly items in the bathroom.

“There’s a resistance to accepting these things. ... Even if life and circumstances are fast upon them, I think people feel like making those types of home modifications are marking the end of their life. They just don’t want it,” she said.

Instead, she talks about “universal design”—elements everyone can use, no matter what their age or physical mobility level.

“A child who broke his or her leg playing soccer would benefit the same way that someone who uses a wheelchair might,” she said.

One example is a custom roll-in shower, she said, which would have the same cost as any other customized shower. Instead of the traditional four-inch-high dam to hold back water, roll-in showers have small berms, like speed bumps, that allow someone using a walker or wheelchair to enter and exit (and still keep back the water).

“It looks as beautiful and unique as any other custom bathroom shower,” Barnard said.

Using smaller floor tiles in the shower will make it easier for the tile to smoothly go over the berm, and also allow more grout to be used, the experts suggest. That allows for more traction, reducing the chance of falls—for anyone.

Smart and Good-Looking

Design smarts include utility, too, Barnard said. Grab bars should be installed “anywhere someone needs to go ... in the shower, in the bath, near the toilet.”

But grab bars don't need to look like they've come out of a public washroom, said Naomi Neilson Howard, founder and chief executive officer of [Native Trails](#), a California-based company specializing in artisan-made kitchen, bath, and lifestyle products.

“You can have beautiful finishes, like bronze or copper, to complement the luxuriousness of the fixtures,” Neilson Howard said.

It's important that grab bars have a plywood or solid-wood backing, as they need to support body weight. “Anchors in drywall screws are a disaster waiting to happen,” Barnard warned.

The wall-hung vanity is a trend in contemporary-design bathrooms, and they don't look like they're installed for mobility reasons. But when mounted high enough off the floor, these vanities provide room for a wheelchair or a walker-user's feet, Barnard and Howard pointed out. That means it's a design element whose use changes with a homeowner's changing needs.

As long as you're installing extra luxury in your personal spa, there's nothing wrong with planning for the future, too—it just might be the look you really wanted all along.