

Expert Advice

Showered In Luxury

Making your custom bathroom an oasis of serenity

Heather C. Jackson



The process of designing a new bathroom can be daunting. From finding a designer to choosing from the myriad of fixtures and features on the market today, homeowners are faced with a million decisions. Luckily, there are experienced professionals in our region who are willing to share their wisdom to help you prepare yourself to turn your bathroom into a true center of luxury.

Choose your Designer

According to David O'Neil, President of Renaissance Tile & Bath in Atlanta, Georgia, and Washington, DC, the bathroom is the new kitchen, fast becoming the focal point of comfort. "They're spaces we live in that are being designed to become sanctuaries in the home." In



order to make that sanctuary a luxurious place to rejuvenate, you need to choose a professional to guide you through what can be a stressful endeavor—but hopefully one with stunning results.

The first step in choosing a designer is to know what you need for your project. Are you starting from scratch and want a designer to walk you through each step? Or would you be better off going to a design center that has all your choices laid out in front of you, and designers on-hand to help you find what you want?

No matter what type of service you choose, the key to looking for a designer is to talk to them, find out what they offer, and make sure they respect what you want out of your bath. Betty Sullivan of Architectural Ceramics, which has three area showrooms, lists the five key things to look for: "Experience, longevity, reliability, compatibility and selection."

"You will be spending a lot of time with these people," says Sullivan, so make sure that you not only like them but like their business practices and the other professionals they work with. "Ask them how they work. Look at their previous work. Call their references. Ask questions. Follow your gut instincts."

And above all, they should listen to you and understand what you want. "Make sure you find a designer who doesn't muscle their aesthetic on you," says O'Neil. They should hear what you're looking for and enhance it."

Preparation and Patience

Perhaps the most important step in facilitating the entire process is to narrow down your ideas before you start. Sullivan urges homeowners to bring whatever selections they have already made with them when they meet with designers or choose products. If you have a cabinet knob, fixture or tile you're in love with, show your designer.

"You cannot plan far enough ahead," says O'Neil. Having a clear idea of the aesthetic or result that you wish to achieve early on in the process will help you communicate with designers and save valuable time making decisions later. But also be prepared for the time that goes into each step of the process.

Mark Scott, of MARK IV Builders in Bethesda warns that for many projects, "clients aren't ready for the number of decisions involved." Even if you prepare your ideas ahead of time, consider that there will need to be time allotted for decision making. "The choices today are tenfold what they were 15 years ago," he says.

"Be patient with the process," says O'Neil. "Understand the time frame." It can be very stressful, especially if there are delays—particularly possible when dealing with some of the premium materials that go into high-end bathrooms, which often require longer lead times. "We always try to teach homeowners patience."

Consider the Budget

"People need to embrace the budget issue," says O'Neil. Through the whole process you have to know what you're willing to invest into the bath, "and that's what it is, an investment." You will live intimately with the result, but a bathroom remodel is also one of the best additions you can make to the value of your home for potential resale down the line.

"You can easily spend \$100,000 on a bathroom; a hallway bath, \$30,000," says Scott. But a designer can help keep that in check; they know how to maximize your budget.

Step Inside

Once you're ready to go, the options are endless. Which is fantastic, as you want all the bells and whistles when designing a truly luxurious bath. It is, after all, place to "escape the rushes of everyday life," says Sarah Kahn Turner, a designer with Gilday Renovations in Silver Spring.

Primary of course is the shower, where hand helds are as popular as ever, as are body sprays, massaging jets and steam units. "The shower has become a bigger focus recently," says Sullivan.

"You probably spend more time standing in the shower than you do sitting on your living room sofa and should spend your time and money accordingly."

"Don't scrimp on the shower," agrees O'Neil. "Even in a bathroom designed on a tight budget, make it ideal." But it's not just inside that counts. As bathing spaces get bigger, the shower changes shape; whether it's making room for two—or more—or wrapping it entirely in glass, the showers are making a larger footprint. If space allows, luxurious showers can be designed without any enclosure at all.

Inside or out, however, it's the tiles that are making a mark in today's bath, as both quality and options increase. "I've seen baths with \$60,000 spent on just the tile in one bathroom," says Scott. "Ten or 15 years ago, there was little choice in tile." But that's changed, as today the materials, sizes and patterns available are virtually endless.

Turner's personal favorite is glass tile, which is growing rapidly in popularity. "It reflects the light so beautifully and reminds me of water, which is comforting," she says.

High-Tech Reflections

It's not all sparkle and glass that makes the difference, though. More and more homeowners are bringing technological advances into the bathroom as well.

One of the most popular amenities is heated floors. Originally a series of pipe; that circulate hot water, floor heating systems have advanced to such methods as electric radiant-heat flooring, which features heat coils threaded into them. Radiant-heat flooring is relatively easy to install, laid in under the new tile. "It's the most asked-for luxury," says Scott.

And professionals are choosing it for themselves, too. "I have a five-year-old son," says O'Neil, "and when he gets out of the bath, he lays down on the warm tile floor and plays like a seal in the sun."

Another hot commodity is the in-mirror television, which disappears behind one-way glass when turned off. "It's probably the coolest luxury to me," laughs Scott.

Mark Scott, of MARK IV Builders in Bethesda warns that for many projects, "clients aren't ready for the number of decisions involved." Even if you prepare your ideas ahead of time, consider that there will need to be time allotted for decision making. "The choices today are tenfold what they were 15 years ago," he says.

Words of Wisdom

Every professional will bring different insights to the table, but by being prepared, you can help make this process easier. "Look to your home," advises Turner. "Know what you have. You can be your own best advocate by knowing more about the house and being able to plan realistically." If you understand what you have to start with, such as the plumbing already in place, you may be able to anticipate problems that could arise.

Sullivan adds, "Start your own notebook." Have a good understanding of the information you are given; learning the information on your selection sheets and plans—and how to comprehend it—will avoid most mistakes or misunderstandings.

Finally, just be prepared to listen, make decisions and let the professionals help you along the way. That's what they're there for. Yes, it can be stressful, but, adds Sullivan, "the end result will provide enjoyment for years to come. In spite of all of the time, effort and compromise I have never heard anyone say that they regretted their new bathroom!"