

Refreshing the bath

Bathroom look all washed up? Don't throw in the towel

By Stacey Wiedower—Special to The Commercial Appeal

On a recent job in Collierville, designer Ami Austin of Ami Austin Interiors worked a miracle in the guest bath.

The miracle came in the fact that although the room looked lavish, it didn't exceed the client's modest budget for the space.

"We did a Venetian plaster treatment on the walls, then we took off the existing mirror and used an antique mirror she already had, along with two sconces," Austin said, noting that a floor-to-ceiling shower curtain creates an elegant focal point.

"She couldn't afford tile, but by pulling everything together we kept the eye from going straight to the floor, so when you walk in you see the shower curtain and mirror."

"Disguising what you don't want to see is a great trick."

There are other tricks to achieving high style in a bathroom without breaking the bank. Here, area design professionals weigh in on what to do—and what not to do—when undertaking a bathroom renovation of any size or scope.

1. Take an honest assessment.

"Every job is different, and you have to identify per job what are the glaring faults in the space and then prioritize according to that," said Shari Carter, a licensed general contractor and owner of SCC Residential Design and Construction.



For instance, take a look at the cabinetry to decide whether it's truly worth saving before deciding to do something drastic like installing new countertops.

"I'm fine with not redoing cabinets if and only if every door closes and hangs properly, if there are no splits or cracks in the doors and if the interior of the cabinet box is in good shape," said Eileen Henry, an interior designer and kitchen and bath designer with Memphis-based Kitchens Unlimited. "If your cabinets are in that good of shape, there's no reason to replace them. You can sand them down and strip them and either re-stain or paint them, or have a faux finisher come in."

Beyond cabinetry, Austin advises surveying the entire bath with a critical eye to determine what needs to be replaced.

"The most important thing, hands down, is a clean bathroom," she said. "Look for sinks that are rusty-looking, dirty grout, faucets that aren't functional. Cleanliness is really essential in a bathroom—you want it to be functional, healthy and safe."

Another way to achieve a clean look in a bathroom is to get rid of clutter, Austin adds. That means making sure you have ample, accessible storage for things like lotion bottles, shaving cream, hair spray, etc.

"Clean counters speak volumes," Austin said. "Ditch the fake plants and overuse of candles."

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2. Start with a neutral palette.

Color, of course, is a subjective thing, but designers agree that when planning the major elements of a bathroom space, neutrals are a safe bet.

"Keep your walls and floor and countertop sort of like a canvas," said Henry, adding that cabinetry, tile work and other decorative elements are the appropriate areas to create a focal point and add pops of color.

"We're seeing a more sedate, almost monochromatic color palette (in the bath)," Henry said. "Everything is much more flowing, much more consistent. People are bringing in linens as accents, artwork as accents."

Carter added that a neutral color on the floor provides a nice foundation for any bath. And it's a look that can easily be achieved on a budget.

"That might mean a ceramic tile that mimics travertine," she said.

Austin did just that for a client in East Memphis. She wanted the look of travertine on the walls and floor in the master bathroom, but not the expense. So she opted for porcelain tile cut in 18-by-36-inch slabs.

"It looked like travertine and cut the cost to about one-third," she said.

3. Repeat this mantra: "Function first."

In a highly used space like a bathroom, esthetics—while important—play second fiddle to functionality.

For instance, a pedestal sink, while it can offer a lot of look in a little space, provides nil in the way of storage, so think twice before adding one in anything other than a small powder room.

"Think about where you're going to put your razor, your toothbrush, your curling iron," Austin pointed out.

These days, freestanding vanity cabinets that resemble furniture are a popular option in bathrooms of all shapes and sizes. But be sure before installing one that it offers enough storage to meet the needs of its users.

Another important aspect of bathroom design that can save money in the long run is to consider how the space will meet your family's changing needs over the years. Universal design is a buzzword in the design field, and it represents "the ultimate fusion of accessible, usable space with pleasing esthetics," Henry said.

"It's especially important in the bath, with people planning for parents to come live with them when they get older or even planning for themselves to be in the same house in their golden years," she said. "You want the design to serve the young person in a family as well as the older person."

That might mean installing grab bars—which have come a long way in recent years, Henry noted—or keeping towels, paper products and other sought-after items in the "mid-third" area of the wall, the most accessible spot.

"You want walk-in showers, tubs with tub decks wide enough to sit down and swing your legs over," Henry said. "You want everything to be safe for everybody, and it's really not that hard to get all that and have it be good design, too."

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4. Don't neglect lighting.

Lighting is one of the most important elements in any room, but particularly in the bathroom, designers agree.

"Lighting is often horrible in bathrooms," Henry said. "Make sure you have enough general lighting, like recessed cans, and also task lighting. It's not enough to just have one; you have to have both types."

Austin added that in addition to general and task lighting, accent lighting is important to establish ambience in a master retreat.

"I'm a believer that the master bath should be a sanctuary for the adults," she said. "If you've got a big spa tub and want to take a bath without glaring bulbs, I like to use chandeliers and sconces in baths."

And designers agree that light fixtures are a quick, easy update to achieve at any level of bathroom renovation, and a wide range of fixtures are available that offer good design at budget-friendly price points.

5. Create a plan, and stick to it.

"A lot of times, when somebody gets into a project, unless they're focused, they'll start going outside of the original concept," Austin said. "They'll see something somewhere and say, 'Oh, I want that,' and it just doesn't fit. It doesn't create a cohesive look when you do that."

When she begins working with a client, Henry presents a comprehensive plan that considers every detail of the space and how it's used.

"Don't just start somewhere and let it have a snowball effect," she said. "Especially if you're planning to remodel the whole area, have the whole plan together before you do anything."

A design professional can offer advice on space planning and the latest in products and finishes the average homeowner doesn't have at his or her fingertips, Carter pointed out.

"Plus running a consistent, managed job saves time, materials and money in the long run," she said.

And of course, designers said, seeking help from credible, licensed plumbers and electricians is essential when approaching these elements of a redo.

"Find good bonded and insured professionals," Henry said. "You'd be surprised at how many homeowners use people who are not insured or bonded. Who's going to pay for the tile replacement when the plumbing bursts underneath the shower bed?"

Overall, Austin said, make sure any improvements you make add value and fit with the style of the house. And when faced with a tight budget, stick to simple updates that won't get in your way later if you decide to do a full-on renovation.

"In that case, I would simply change out light fixtures, replace knobs and paint the cabinets and walls," Carter said.

Designers also pointed out that if countertops are in dire need of replacement, most fabricators offer granite remnants from leftover jobs at discounted prices. And sinks, toilets and faucets—while it's a good bet to avoid the cheapest ones on the market—can be replaced at relatively little expense.

"Your electrician and plumber will give you good advice," Henry pointed out. "Ask your plumber, 'Which brands of faucets do you like? Which do you see that work well?'"

"There's so much out there, it's really worth asking somebody. Do your research and do your homework."

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—Ami Austin, Ami Austin Interiors