



# A Bathroom of Green Slate

Meticulous layout, a cantilevered stone countertop and a parade of bears form an elegant master bath

BY MICHAEL COON

**T**he Chinese slate used in this bathroom was formed when a person could walk from Santa Fe to Beijing. No one ever did because this period was about 500 million years before humans appeared on the planet and about 200 million years before the continents broke apart.

The characteristics of slate—its color and hardness—vary depending on where it was quarried. For the bathroom featured here (photo facing page), we used a green slate called China Aqua Rose (supplied by Milestone Inc., 1000 Cordova Place, Santa Fe,

NM 87501; 505-989-1999). The *rose* in the name comes from the color running through the veins in some of the slates. It's a beautiful material, but when I heard that the owner wanted to use slate on the floors *and* the walls, I had my doubts.

## Softening the effect of slate

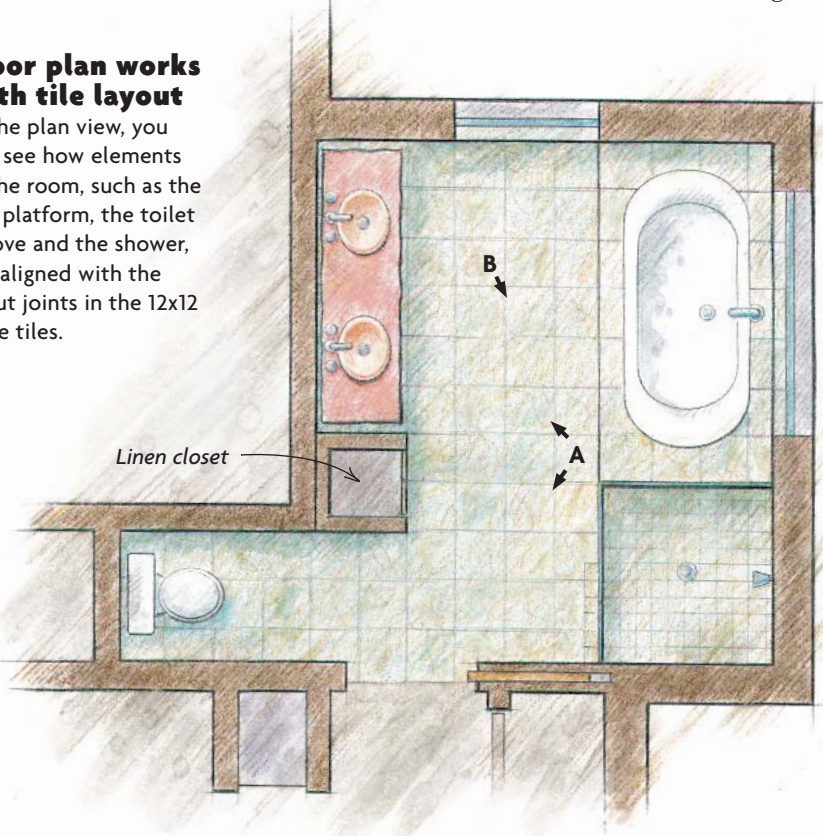
Contractor Steve Bone and designer Noel Norskog had been hired to add a second-floor master-bedroom suite to a house in the hills east of Santa Fe. They invited me to tile the master bathroom (drawing below).

We were all worried that too much slate tile might be overwhelming or make the room feel cold and harsh. After talking it over, however, we decided that having slate on the walls and floors would be okay if steps were taken to soften the room.

First, we would lay out the room and the tile on the same grid. In other words, doors, windows, counters and niches would be designed to align with grout lines in the 12x12 tiles. Second, rather than setting tiles randomly, we would use their natural texture and color to create subtle patterns on the walls

## Floor plan works with tile layout

In the plan view, you can see how elements in the room, such as the tub platform, the toilet alcove and the shower, are aligned with the grout joints in the 12x12 slate tiles.







**A plaster skylight bathes the room in light. Appearing to float in a sea of green slate, a sandstone counter with hammered-copper sinks hides the one seam in the floor-to-ceiling mirror. Photos taken at A on floor plan.**



and floors. Third, we would create soft curves at the ceiling using a custom plaster cornice and curved skylight wells. Fourth, we would create a break 4 ft. above the floor with a feature strip of three-dimensional tile bears.

### Making the room work on the grid

By having the room and the tile layout work together, a subtle fusion happens that allows each element to inhabit its space naturally with a sense that it belongs there. Although keeping the layout on the grid was difficult and required some shimming, the results are worth it. We framed things slightly back from the grid of grout lines so that if minor adjustments were necessary, we could adjust by shimming the framing.

We started by placing two large windows on the tile grid at a height that allowed privacy without curtains. The sink area, the toilet alcove, the linen closet, the tub platform

and the shower partitions were also laid out on the exact tile grid (photo p. 88).

Not every dimension has to work on the grid. It's more important to achieve the appearance and feel of an exact tile layout. For example, in this bathroom, the length and width of the tub platform work on the grid, but the height does not. If we had taken the platform height to two full tiles, it would have been uncomfortably high.

Bathrooms seem bigger when you use clear glass for the partitions and doors that enclose a shower. And by burying the channels that hold the glass in the grout lines (drawing facing page), the glass appears to float (photo facing page). This glass channel is readily available from most glass suppliers.

### Using patterns in the tile

Slate often has distinct colors, patterns and sometimes even fossils in the stone. Many

installers think the proper way to install it is randomly. But I prefer to get individual colors and patterns to work together, creating a natural flow throughout a room.

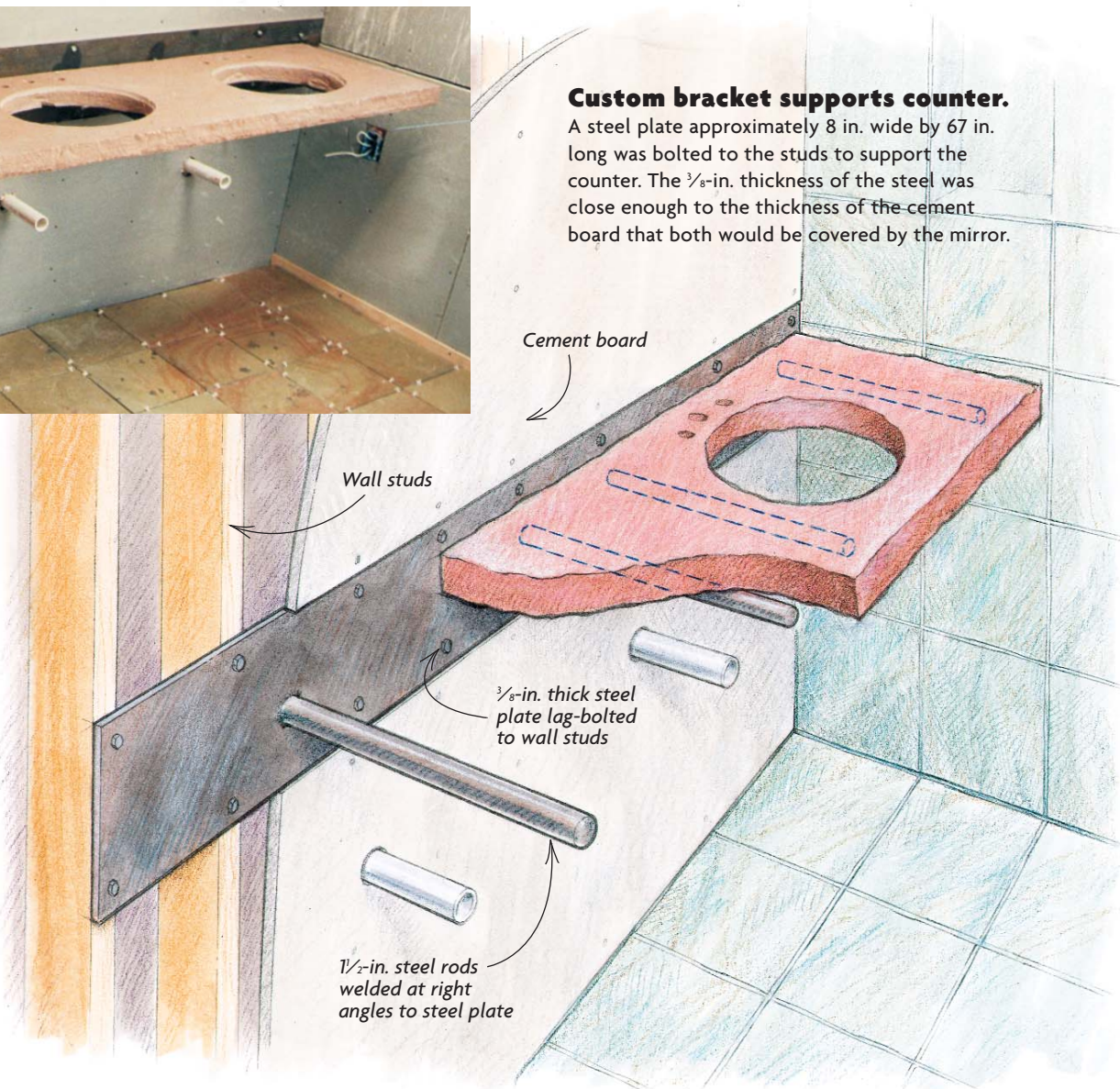
I laid out all the tile ahead of time, sorting it first by color and then by pattern. I assigned distinct color groupings to a specific wall in the bathroom and then worked subtler shades between them, allowing the colors to change gradually. Although time consuming, this process can be done as the tiles are being sealed prior to installation.

### Curved plaster, floating counters and parading bears, oh my

Noel Norskog's design for plaster work on the ceiling did a lot to counter the potential harshness of so much stone. A gently curved 6-in. cornice all the way around the room and painted the same light color as the ceiling brought the ceiling down and eased the



**It's not really floating.** The 1½-in. thick sandstone counter rests on steel dowels welded to a piece of plate steel, which is in turn bolted to the wall studs.



### Custom bracket supports counter.

A steel plate approximately 8 in. wide by 67 in. long was bolted to the studs to support the counter. The 3/8-in. thickness of the steel was close enough to the thickness of the cement board that both would be covered by the mirror.



transition upward. Curving the skylight wells also helped, giving them a domelike quality that added dimension to the room.

Another beautiful finishing touch we used was a floating sandstone counter designed and built by Steve Bone. The sandstone slab rests on steel rods mounted to the wall framing (drawing and photo, facing page).

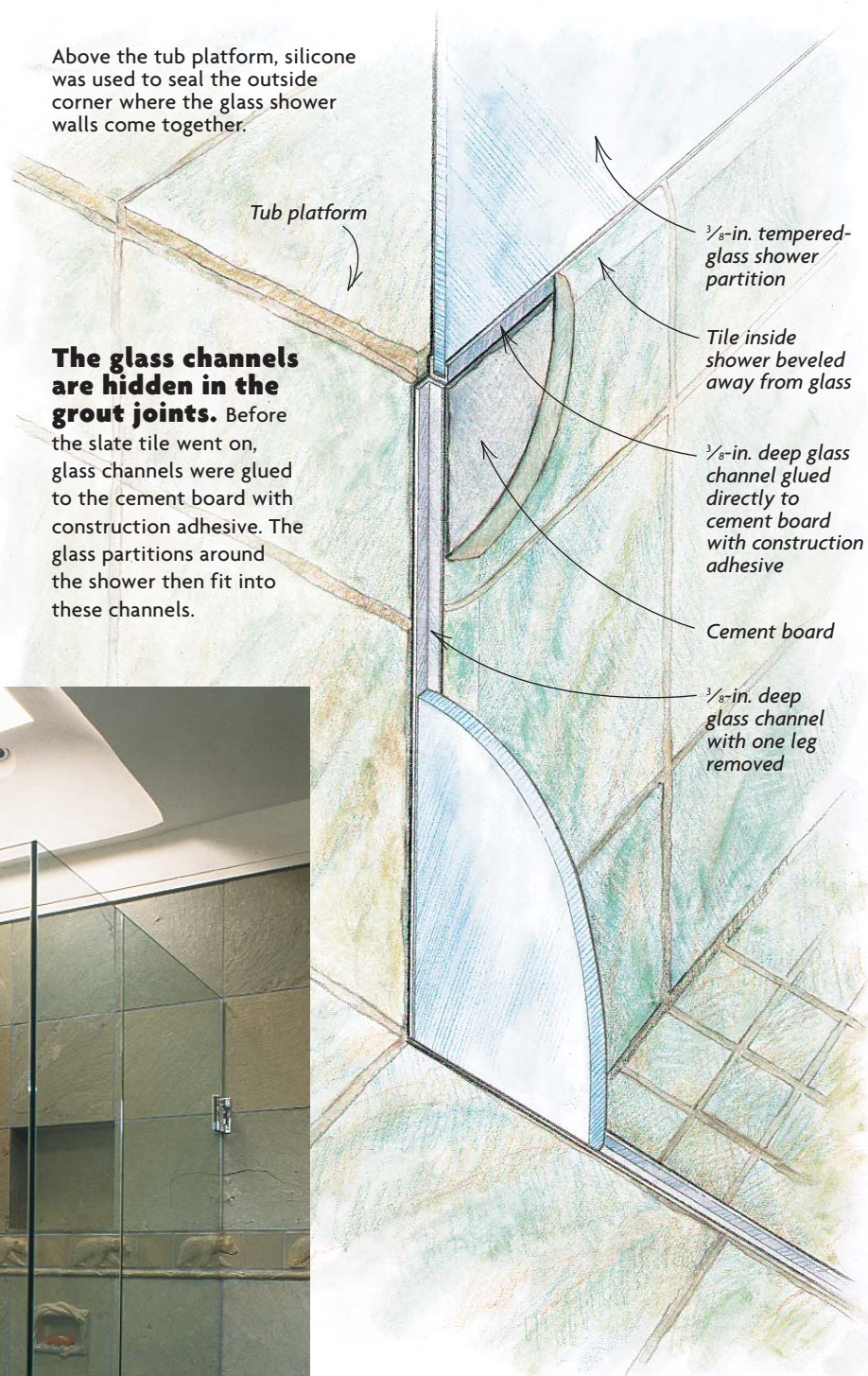
Probably the first thing everyone notices in this bathroom, though, is the bears. The owner loves bears, and he found the 3-D bear tiles that match the slates amazingly well (Pratt & Larson Ceramics, Portland, OR; 503-231-9469). We added log tiles beneath the bears to give them something to walk on. And I used matching blank tiles between the bears to space them evenly on each wall. □

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Above the tub platform, silicone was used to seal the outside corner where the glass shower walls come together.

**The glass channels are hidden in the grout joints.**

Before the slate tile went on, glass channels were glued to the cement board with construction adhesive. The glass partitions around the shower then fit into these channels.



**Glass walls are barely there.** Tempered-glass partitions, aligned with the grout joints in the tile, neatly corral the shower without making the room feel smaller. Photo taken at B on floor plan.