



The Jewel-Box Bathroom

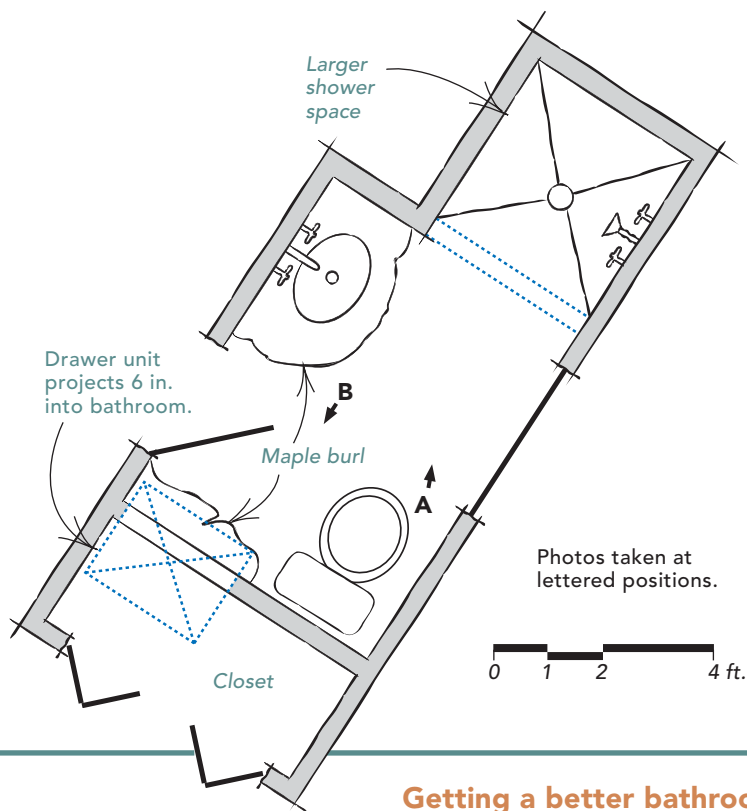
An artful remodel uses mosaics and maple burls to revive a dowdy relic

BY DIANA MAXUM

Our small bathroom was a vision in brown and pink, with fixtures circa 1964. It contained six different kinds of tile, some of which were camouflaged inelegantly with white paint. Essentially a powder room with a shower, it is the only bathroom on the main floor of the house. Because the shower pan had leaked in the past, we knew there had to be significant rot. My husband, Gary, figured that someday he would end up in the crawlspace during his morning shower. It was time to think about a remodel.

Seduced by a swirl of grain

The challenge was to use the same footprint and get a bathroom with adequate insulation, lighting, ventilation, and storage, all on our limited budget. Of course, it had to look great and be unique, too. In the summer of 2003, free time and a little extra cash enabled us to long last to dig in to this project. Gary is a graphic-design professor, cabinet-maker, and all-around handy guy; I am a designer, mosaic artist, and



Getting a better bathroom without enlarging the space

Although the author didn't change the relative size and location of the sink, toilet, and shower, she did change certain details to give the bathroom more room. The most dramatic changes were removing all cabinetry and recessing a small chest of drawers into an adjoining closet. The shower was enlarged by removing the header and jambs.



Lots of color, lots of light, but not lots of money. The author and her husband renovated their dim and drab bathroom by rebuilding the shower pan and installing new fixtures, new tile, handmade mosaics, and new lighting. The bathroom's centerpiece is the maple-burl pedestal sink. The bark-trimmed slab of wood is complemented by a cool-colored sink of frosted glass and a wall-mounted faucet. Photo taken at A on floor plan.

Deep storage comes in a thin package



To gain storage space lost during the renovation, the author's husband dressed up a recycled drawer base with cherry drawer fronts and a small piece of maple burl. Recessed into the back of an adjacent closet (photo left), the drawers extend minimally into the room, but have full capacity. Photos taken at B on floor plan.



project manager. We hired a plumber, drywall tapper, and shower-door installer, and did everything else ourselves.

Six years ago, as part of our kitchen remodel, we had a slab of maple burl installed at the end of the counter. The burl is fun and quirky, and we love it. Later, during a shopping trip to a local hardwood supplier, we saw a stack of freshly cut and waxed maple-burl slabs, perfect for a counter in our new bathroom (photo p. 71). We chose the largest one with the most even edges. I made a ¼-in.-thick foam-core template of the slab and experimented with different cuts, fitting it into the corner. The template also was handy to carry along when shopping for the perfect sink. After sanding and applying countless coats of marine varnish, Gary fit the new burl into the corner. We used the remaining pieces for the counter next to the toilet and for two little corner shelves.

We still needed something to prop up the burl slab. A branch or log seemed like a good idea, in keeping with the tree theme. We spent an afternoon with a neighbor on his wooded property, looking for the perfect curved or crooked branch. We found it in a dying crab-apple tree. Gary peeled, polished, and varnished the branch, pruning it more and more until the final fit and installation.

The burl was to be the star, but to sit on it, we wanted a vessel sink that was cool and affordable. We looked at handmade glass bowls that cost thousands of dollars. We looked at mixing bowls, woks, birdbaths, and hand-thrown clay bowls. Nothing was right or in our price range. Finally, at one of the local big-box stores, I found a simple frosted-glass bowl from the Translucence Collection by Deco Lav (561-274-2110; www.decolav.com) that cost \$198. I bought it and then ordered a wall-mount faucet and shower valve from Kohler (800-456-4537; www.us.kohler.com).

For the new toilet, I wanted something to go with the greenish tone of the bowl sink. American Standard (www.americanstandard.com; 800-442-1902) had the perfect color, a pale blue-green. Because the room is so small, we got the Cadet round-front model.

Bargain-hunting makes great tile affordable

We still had not settled on the tile for the shower or the floor. Although we could do all the installation ourselves, we really didn't want to spend \$5 to \$10 per sq. ft. for tile. We also had concerns about tiling the sloping shower pan.

By now, we were making weekly trips to Second Use Building Materials in Seattle (www.seconduse.com; 206-763-6929) for anything that might fit into our eclectic bathroom. We found a perfect 30 sq. ft. of Vermont green slate, not quite enough to do the whole floor, but I could design around that. After three more trips to Second Use, we managed to find enough, at \$2 to \$3 per sq. ft., to do the whole floor, sink backsplash, and floor trim. At another discount store, we found some maple-colored 6-in. wall and bullnose tile on closeout; we paid just \$1 per sq. ft.

We didn't want to use slate in the shower, so we continued our search for inexpensive tile and a way to tie it all together. The local big-box store had 12-in. glazed floor tile that matched the slate perfectly. They even had a whole box of chipped tile (perfect for mosaics), which they sold to us at a significant discount.

Built-in drawers, storage that doesn't take up space

Choosing the burl and the bowl pedestal sink and removing some old cabinets next to the toilet made the room seem larger. To recoup our

Drawing inspiration from a collection of dried leaves, the author designed a series of mosaic highlights for the bathroom walls, floor, and shower.



Mosaics are just broken tiles rescued from the Dumpster

While Gary was doing a careful demolition job, reframing the shower stall, and pouring a new shower pan (he used info from “Installing a Leakproof Shower Pan” by Tom Meehan, *FHB* #141, pp. 66-71), I was designing and building mosaics.

I made a template of the shower pan, taping it together to mold to the compound curves and cutting out around the center drain. I drew the spiral, then traced dried leaves onto the paper, later sketching in the stems. Because the shower pan is relatively large, I cut the pattern into 18-in.-sq. quarters and taped each one to a 24-in. square of ½-in.-thick plywood, light enough to be moved easily and rigid enough to hold the tile. I then covered the pattern with clear contact paper, sticky side up.

I smashed tile with a hammer and sorted tile shards into piles by color. Then I laid out the pieces glaze side up on the contact paper, cutting and nipping shards to fit, following the lines on the pattern underneath. When all the tiles were laid out and I was happy with the design, color, and fit, I adhered clear Tile Tape (Mesh Mount Paper Co.; 800-456-7273; www.meshmountpaper.com) to the face of the mosaic to hold it all together. It now was sandwiched between contact paper and tape.

I cut the mosaic apart into manageable sections, taking care to plan the installation sequence, placing register marks on easily confused edges, drawing in directional arrows, and numbering each section by order of installation.

Just before installing the sections, I removed the contact paper from the back of the mosaics and laid them on a board. Then Gary slid each section face up onto a long, narrow piece of plywood and positioned it over the correct area in the pan; and I slipped it into the thinset, much like putting a pizza into the oven. When all the sections were in the thinset, they still were sheeted so that I could move them a little to make minor adjustments and seamlessly marry all the sections together. I removed the tile tape before the thinset set up completely and made adjustments for any loose pieces.

Our system worked beautifully. I grouted and sealed the shower pan and protected it with heavy kraft paper before proceeding with the rest of the tile.

lost storage, we designed a 25-in.-wide drawer base to go through the wall into a little-used closet. The drawers protrude only 6 in. into the bath, and they made a perfect spot to mount the remainder of the burl slab as a narrow counter (photos facing page).

The drawer base was purchased used from a local building-materials recycler. Gary veneered the drawer base with cherry and built new figured-cherry drawer faces. Cast-leaf knobs that were made by Michael Aram complete the leaf theme (www.thehardwarehut.com; 800-708-6649).

Making the room bright and airy

When the room was down to the studs, we insulated the walls and the ceiling with fiberglass insulation for both heat retention and noise reduction. Gary installed a new recessed light in the shower, a more

powerful and quieter ceiling fan by Nutone (www.nutone.com; 888-336-3948), and EasyLite Flextrack lights by Europhase Inc. (800-660-5391; www.easy-lite.com). The lights, a group of five small halogen spots connected by a flexible conductor (photo p. 71), can be installed in any configuration desired. The conductor’s serpentine curve allowed us to direct light to specific areas (the sink, the toilet, a large painting, and the area in front of the shower) without having to rewire or move any boxes; we wired the fixture to the existing box in the middle of the ceiling. At \$149, the lights also were a great value. □

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