

# 2 Approaches to the Basement Bath

Solving the typical problems with stylish, practical solutions

**M**inneapolis remodeler Greg Schmidt gets more and more calls these days for basement and attic remodels. Rather than build a new house, homeowners are looking to take advantage of the spaces they already have under their roof.

Last year, one of Schmidt's clients asked him to evaluate her 1100-sq.-ft. basement to see if it could be converted into an apartment for her retired father. Schmidt was impressed by the generous 8-ft. ceilings in the basement, and by the size of the seven windows scattered throughout. It would make a terrific apartment.

Central to the goal of making the space into a home was creating a comfortable bathroom full of architectural details

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## A BATH FOR A BASEMENT APARTMENT

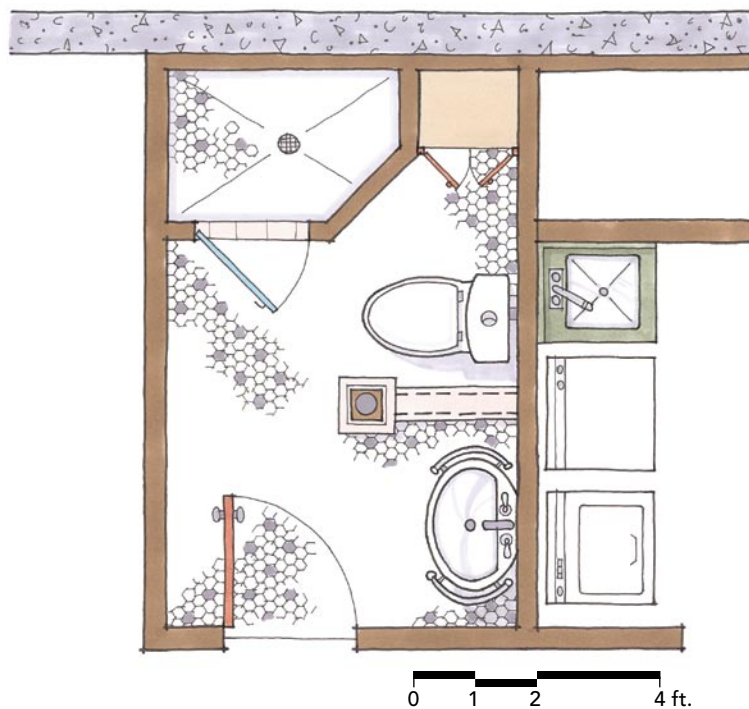




**A subtle geometry lesson.** The oval shape of the lavatory is repeated in the glass shelf below and the mirror above, establishing an underlying unity to the decor. The subway wall tiles and hexagonal floor tiles repeat details from the upstairs baths.



**Constraints can be your friend.** Moving the drain line would have been a major hassle. Rather than reroute it, builder Greg Schmidt wrapped it with frame-and-panel trim, transforming it into an elegant column anchoring the half-wall that separates the toilet alcove from the lavatory. Blocks screwed to the wall and epoxied to the drain line anchor the column.



**SOURCES** From the Standard Collection by American Standard: Console table and lavatory  
 • Mirror with medicine cabinet • Hampton widespread faucet • Toilet: Toto colonial white Dalton

**Design and construction:** Greg Schmidt, Minneapolis, Minn.  
[www.homerestorationinc.com](http://www.homerestorationinc.com)

Photos: Charles Miller, except where noted. Top right: Courtesy of Greg Schmidt. Floor-plan drawings: Martha Garstang Hill.

similar to those found elsewhere in the house.

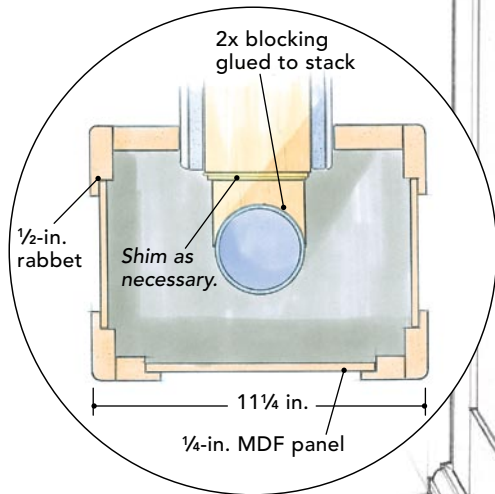
### Deciding where the bath should go was the easy part

Part of the basement makeover needed to include a relocated laundry area, and during the initial site visit, Schmidt realized only one place would work: between the laundry chute and the existing drain lines. The bathroom logically shared this proximity to plumbing, which included the main soil stack draining the entire house. The stack was right in the middle of what would become the new bath.

Rather than move the stack, Schmidt turned it into an architectural focal point and an organizational element in the plan. As a Craftsman column (photo p. 68 and drawing right), the stack anchors a half-wall that separates the lavatory side of the bath from the toilet side.



**Don't forget the cleanout.** Held in place by screws nesting in trim washers, a removable panel at the column base leads to the soil-stack cleanout.



3/4-in. MDF stile

1 3/4-in. bed molding  
3/4-in. cove

## BUILDER'S NOTES

# COLUMN DETAILS

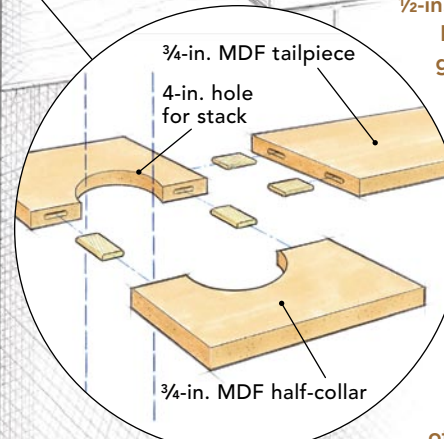
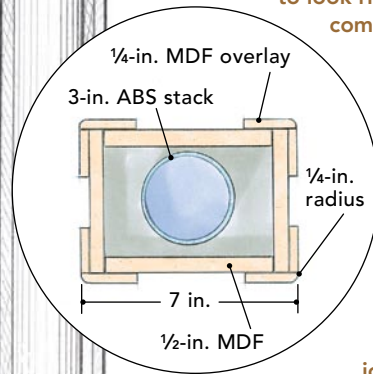
The first thing people notice about this bathroom is the column trim. It had to mimic a structural column to look right. To that end, I split the column into three components; a lower, plinthlike base portion that wraps both the soil stack and the end of the half-wall, and a narrower upper portion that wraps the rest of the stack. A ledge atop the half-wall separates the two parts of the column and functions as a toiletry shelf. I wanted the base portion of the column to be strong enough to stand up to the errant shoe or vacuum nozzle. As shown in the drawing, the base is a frame-and-panel assembly made of 3/4-in. MDF (medium-density fiberboard) rails and stiles joined with loose tenons. I chose loose tenons for their extra strength, both in transit from shop to site and in place in the bath. I used my Festool Domino joiner ([www.festoolusa.com](http://www.festoolusa.com)) to cut the mortises for the tenons. Then I used my router to cut 1/2-in. by 1/2-in. rabbets on the back sides of the rails and stiles to accept glued-in-place 1/4-in. MDF panels. The base is capped with a 3/4-in.-thick MDF collar and a tail piece that serves as the shelf atop the half-wall. I assembled these on site and glued their loose tenons

in place with gel-viscosity Super Glue speeded up with aerosol activator, both from Rockler ([www.rockler.com](http://www.rockler.com)).

I used a different, lighter-weight approach on the upper column. As shown in the detail, it is composed of 1/2-in. MDF, with 1/4-in.-thick MDF strips tacked and glued at the corners to mimic a frame-and-panel assembly. Like the lower column,

its corners are softened with a 1/4-in.-radius router bit. Mitered moldings dress up the columns' intersections and mimic the home's other trim details. After the components were on site, I finish-nailed and glued them together. Then I filled the nail holes with joint compound and applied two coats of Benjamin Moore Satin Impervo over a coat of oil-based primer.

—Greg Schmidt



TimberStrand wall



## A SPA BATH IN THE BASEMENT

# 2

A couple with three young children acquired a house in Portland, Ore., that included an 1100-sq.-ft. unfinished basement. Thinking both short-term use and long-term utility, they hired designer/builder Paul Johnson to turn a portion of the basement into a multi-purpose space that could be a playroom for the kids, a media room for the entire family, and a spare bedroom for overnight guests. In one corner, they carved out a spa bath that includes a steam shower big enough for the whole family, and a long-wished-for sauna.

### Turning an obstacle into an asset

This is a family that likes to take steam baths together, and as such, they requested a bench in the shower big

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#### **Shower and steam room.**

*In this basement spa, the family can stand beneath the showerheads or relax on a travertine bench and enjoy a steam bath. The heated towel bar helps to keep the space free of excess moisture.*

enough for everybody. Johnson had been thinking of the shower as a rectangular shape, but the corner where the shower needed to go has a jog in the foundation that limited the length of the bench. The longer he made the bench, the smaller the sauna got. The shower started to look like a hallway. And then, the obvious solution to the plan made itself apparent. Why not make two benches (photo p. 71), one on each side of the foundation jog?

With that decision made, the plan quickly fell into place. To get it across to his clients, Johnson took out blue

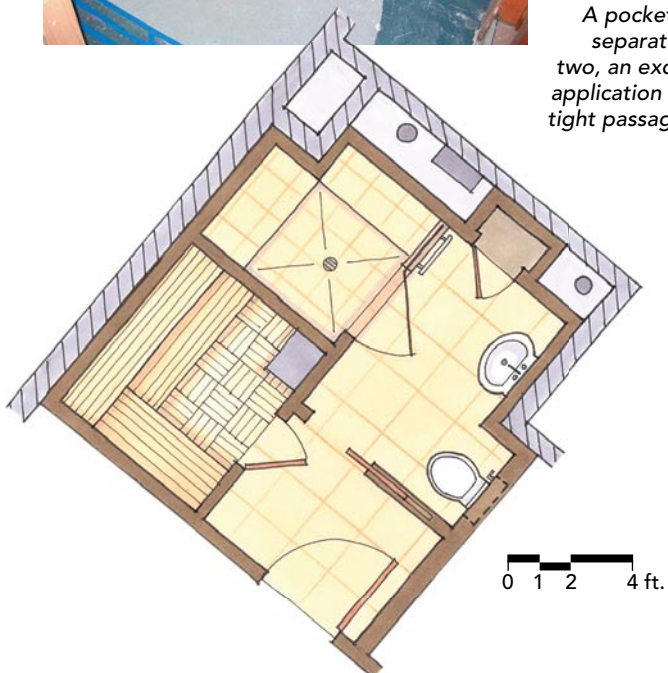
masking tape and sketched in the spaces and fixtures at full scale (photo below).

### Wall-mounted toilet solves two problems

Because the drain line is close to floor level in this part of the basement, a traditional floor-mounted toilet limited its placement in the plan. A wall-mounted toilet, on the other hand, could be installed where it worked best in the room. In addition, its in-wall tank frees up a couple of square feet of floor space, and lifting the bowl off the floor creates a sense of roominess, important in a small bath.



**Full-scale blueprint.** Marking the major elements of the bath with masking tape on the basement floor made it easier to evaluate how the plan would work. The shower space is at the top, the sauna to the left. A pocket door separates the two, an excellent application in this tight passageway.





**Keep it simple, if possible.** This wall-mounted toilet had just enough fall between the bowl and the sewer line to make a simple connection requiring no pumps. The cleanout cover, mounted in the baseboard, mimics the look of the flush buttons over the bowl.



## SOURCES

**Showerhead:** WaterTile by Kohler  
**Handheld shower:** Stillness by Kohler  
**Pedestal sink:** Darling by Duravit  
**Toilet:** Darling by Duravit  
**Faucet:** Symbol by Kohler  
**Wall sconces:** Sine by Motiv  
**Sauna kit:** Finlandia Sauna

## Design and construction:

Paul Johnson, Portland, Ore.

[www.pauljohnsoncarpentry.com](http://www.pauljohnsoncarpentry.com)

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## Minimizing moisture problems in a basement bath

The words **musty** and **basement** go together for good reason. Basement walls are cool, and moist air wants to condense on those cool surfaces, where it irrigates mold and leads to stale, musty odors. Adding a bathroom (typically without a window) to a basement can send the basement moisture meter sky high. Here's how these two baths deal with the problem.

**In bath #1**, a climate with extreme temperature and humidity swings:

- **Closed-cell polyurethane** foam between the framing and the basement wall keeps the bathroom wall warm enough to minimize condensation.
- **Epoxy grout** prevents water penetration into the tile joints.
- **Large windows** in the rest of the basement and a 110-cfm bath fan promote airflow.
- **There's no AC**, but a dehumidifier helps when it gets sticky in the summer.
- **TimberStrand engineered studs** are used for straightness and stability in walls that have tile finishes.

**In bath #2**, a climate with less extreme temperature and humidity variations:

- **A heated towel bar** and an electric radiant floor keep air temperatures and wall surfaces above the dew point.
- **A Panasonic 110-cfm bath fan** on a 60-minute timer removes moisture.