

# Directions to the Powder Room

Pack big value into little spaces with custom fixtures and efficient floor plans

BY NENA DONOVAN LEVINE

**W**hen bathroom rush hour hits our family, the question of whether a hall closet is more useful than a half-bath doesn't even surface. There's nothing like nature's call to focus your priorities. The hall closet always loses out to the water closet.

Strictly speaking, half-baths have but two fixtures: the sink (more accurately called the lavatory) and the toilet. Add a shower or a tub, and you've got a full bath. Put a half-bath in the public part of the house, and it becomes a powder room.

Regardless of the precise designation, however, a powder room affords an important measure of convenience to guests and residents alike, and a way to make a sweeping design declaration in a small space, perhaps even a former closet.

A half-bath also can add value to a home. Charles Hartigan, a Realtor in Avon, Conn., says that a half-bath added to a home that formerly had only one full bath can mean a return of \$15,000 to \$20,000. According to Hartigan, high-end new homes in his area are now built with two half-baths on the main level: a formal powder room and a less formal half-bath off the mud/laundry room. The homeowner who adds

**High-style storage.** A base cabinet, open shelves, drawers, and a ceiling-high cabinet yield abundant storage in a narrow bath (photo facing page). Designed and built by Harrell Remodeling, Mountain View, Calif.



**Spare fixtures are just right for powder rooms.** Single-lever faucets, such as the pitcher-shaped Vas ceramic faucet from Kohler (above), are in scale with small spaces. Open sink bases, such as this table-leg cabinet (photo right), can avoid claustrophobia in a tiny bath.



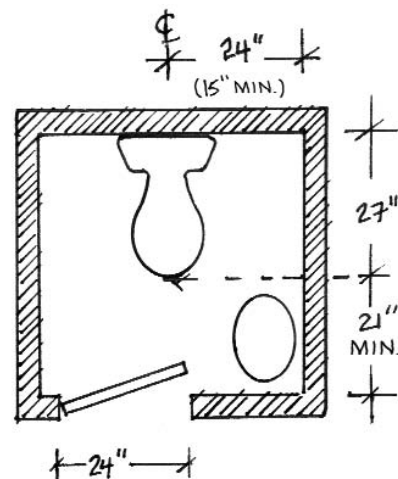




## FLOOR-PLAN VARIATIONS

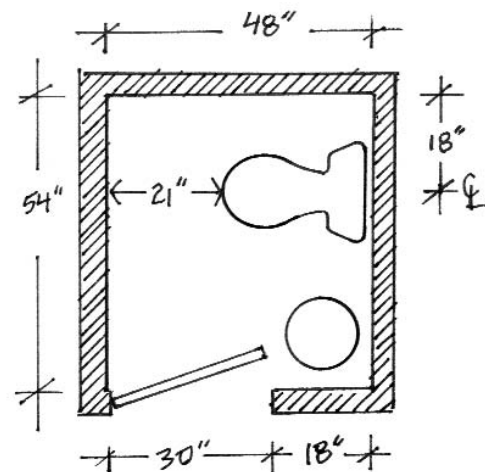
### 1. THE MIGHTY MINI

At 4 ft. sq., this plan is about as small a layout as clearances permit. The lavatory can be a pedestal, wall-hung, or corner-mount. The 24-in. doorway could be wider, depending upon lavatory choice. This plan fits in a converted closet.



### 2. ONE WET WALL

This 4-ft. by 4-ft. 6-in. rectangular layout requires only one wet wall, which contains the plumbing, and that can mean a more economical installation. Not all toilets are short enough to allow the 21-in. clearance in front, so check fixture dimensions. Possible locations: off the front hall or back entry.



**A skylight deep inside a house?** Yep. Solatube skylights use a reflective tube to deliver daylight to rooms several floors below the roof.

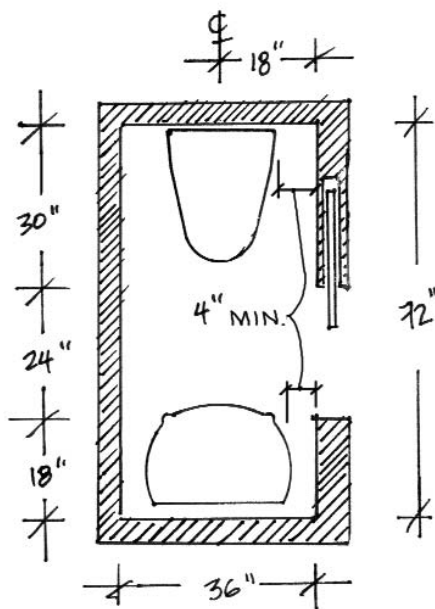


## Daylight for a bathroom with no outside walls

Tucked away in quirky spaces, many powder rooms end up without an exterior wall, isolated from the sunshine. But there are ways that range from simple to ingenious to cadge a little light. If the bathroom door is near a window, your simplest strategy is to use a glazed door with obscure glass, a transom above the door, or both. If the bath is under a day-lit stairway, consider wired-glass risers to let in some light (photo below).

Another option is the Solatube (photo above), a skylight that admits sunlight through a highly reflective tube for up to 40 ft. (Solatube International Inc.; 760-597-4400; [www.solatube.com](http://www.solatube.com)). An optional ventilator kit, including an in-line motor, fulfills the code-mandated venting requirement.

**Daylight under the stairs.** Wired-glass risers in the stairway above this little powder room let in light from a window over the stair's landing. Design by Paul and Peggy Duncker.



### 3. UNDER THE STAIRS

The pocket door is the key to this 3-ft. by 6-ft. plan, although an out-swinging door also could work. A freestanding lavatory, such as Kohler's Camber console table (photo right), works well in this plan. This shape is typical of space that is carved from under stairs or converted from closets.



that second half-bath to the right property can "probably net at least a three-to-one return on investment," Hartigan says. That's because homebuyers, and the real-estate agents who represent them, search and sort listings by criteria such as number of baths. The additional half-bath may cast a wider net for higher bidders.

### So, how teensy can a half-bath be?

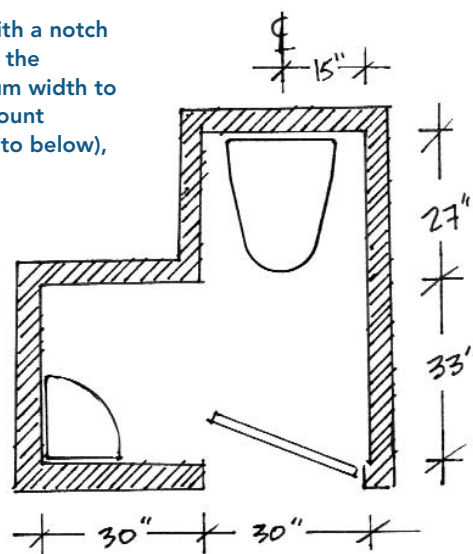
That depends on where, geographically speaking, the half-bath will be. There is no single nationwide code that governs the dimensions of residential rooms, but most jurisdictions follow the guidelines put forth by the Council of American Building Officials (CABO) or the International Residential Code (IRC). Their minimum requirements for clearances and ventilation (below) inevitably suggest certain basic plan configurations that have endless variations. Your inspector can elaborate on local code provisions.

#### Minimum size requirements

- Minimum distance from the toilet centerline to a sidewall is 15 in.
- Minimum clearance in front of the toilet bowl must be 21 in.

### 4. TWO TINY ALCOVES

This interior powder room is a 5-ft. square with a notch taken out of it to accommodate a chimney in the adjacent room. The toilet niche is the minimum width to meet code (30 in.), and it is cozy. A corner-mount lavatory, such as the Novella by Porcher (photo below), fits the bill.





- Minimum headroom is 7 ft.
- Glazed areas must cover 3 sq. ft.; a minimum of 1½ sq. ft. must be openable for ventilation. Artificial illumination may be substituted for daylight, but if there is no window, a ventilation system capable of producing a change of air every 12 minutes must be provided.

In many homes this ventilation requirement presents the greatest challenge. If the room is an interior space, ductwork to the outside is required. In this situation, consider using a Solatube (sidebar facing page) for both ventilation and a source of daylight.

### Door placement is a critical factor

In spaces that are this small, the door width, placement, and swing are, well, pivotal. Neither CABO nor the IRC holds sway because a half-bath is not considered a means of egress. The bath entry door may be either inward or outward swinging, and no minimum door width is required. An outward-swinging door prevents the occupant from wedging the door shut in the event of a fall, and it allows more fixture-layout options. But an outward-swinging door can endanger those outside the bathroom, so consider the location of the half-bath in light of the foot traffic that moves in the area. Is a pocket door feasible? This type of door doesn't swing at all but tucks into a cavity in the wall. Although the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) doesn't regulate residential baths, many upgrades can make a half-bath more usable for a disabled person (sidebar below).

You can tuck a half-bath into less than 20 sq. ft. (top drawing, p. 95). Potentially convertible spaces include closets and the area under a run of stairs. A dormer or skylight can provide headroom for a half-bath in the attic. On the other hand, a half-bath in the basement may require a platform to accommodate the drain lines (sidebar p. 98). By the way, aligning upper-floor installations with existing plumbing is one way to keep down costs.

### Some fixtures were made just to be in a powder room

A simple way to adhere to code clearances in these diminutive spaces is to choose similarly scaled fixtures. There is a boatload of choices for these rooms. Here are the salient points:

Lavatories are available in minuscule sizes and specialty shapes. Porcher's Elfe, for example, measures 19¼ in. by 9¼ in. (top photo, p. 98). The faucet mounts to one side of the bowl. In addition to diminutive wall-hung lavatories, space-saving designs include corner sinks, inset lavatories, and special pedestal sinks designed for corner installations (photos right). Another option is to mount a standard-shape bowl under, in, or on a pie-shaped shelf or cabinet.

Bowls mounted on wrought-iron or hammered-bronze pedestal stands work well in small spaces because these sculptural elements are visual lightweights



**You don't need a big sink to wash your hands.** Clockwise from top left, a corner lavatory from Elizabethan Classics measures 14 in. along the wall sides. Robern's Wet Lavatory features a semi-inset stainless-steel bowl. A petite pedestal lavatory from Porcher updates a classic style. The Starck 3 wall-hung wash basin from Duravit includes a porcelain skirt to conceal the drain trap.

## Making a half-bath accessible

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) doesn't apply to single-family residential construction. But it does have plenty of advice on how to make bathrooms more accessible:

- Install grab bars at 33 in. to 36 in. above the floor on walls flanking the toilet, or all around a narrow powder room for support near the lavatory. The bars must be anchored into the studs or into

prepared (reinforced) walls. You then also have towel bars.

- Install an ADA-compliant toilet, and place the toilet-paper dispenser at 24 in. to 26 in. above the floor.
- Eliminate the door saddle and consider installing an outward-swinging door.
- Use fittings and hardware that are ADA-compliant, such as the lever-type door handles.

- Increase the illumination level and the contrast between materials.
- Install an intercom system or alarm device so that the occupant can summon help if necessary.
- If you've got the space, install a door that allows at least a 32-in. net clear opening, and provide enough open floor space to allow a 60-in. turning radius for a wheelchair.

## Basement half-baths can offer special challenges

A basement half-bath typically presents two potential problems: The drain lines are lower than sewer or septic lines, and ceiling height may be marginal.

The first condition requires a pump and a grinder to push the waste uphill to the sewer/septic line. The Saniplus system (Sanitary For All; [www.sanitaryforall.com](http://www.sanitaryforall.com); 800-363-5874) claims to evacuate sewage and gray water from up to 12 ft. below the sewer line. It retails for about \$650. The toilet bowl and tank are included.

Another system, Qwik Jon (Zoeller Inc.; 800-928-7867; [www.zoeller.com](http://www.zoeller.com)), mounts the toilet on a raised platform that encloses the toilet piping. The platform enclosure and a capture tank behind the toilet can be hidden beneath a 2x6 subfloor and a wall, respectively. Consider the existing basement-ceiling height before raising the floor to build in this system. Qwik Jon prices start at \$670, plus the cost of the toilet.

CABO permits basement-ceiling heights of 6 ft. 8 in., and 6 ft. 4 in. under beams, ducts, and other obstructions if the basement is not a habitable space.



**Space-saving fixtures.** California designer/builder Markus Robinson chose an in-wall toilet tank (Geberit, available from Duravit) to gain floor space. A tiny lavatory (Elfe, by Porcher) is quite adequate for light washing.



**Sculptural elements with a light touch.** A tapering tower of hammered steel offers an onyx bowl in Stone Forest's pedestal sink (photo above). Acorn's NeoComby grafts a stainless-steel lavatory to a gleaming toilet (photo right). Stone Forest's black granite wash bowl atop a cherry stand is clean and simple (photo far right).

(photo left). But this approach isn't limited to metalwork. Long-legged wooden cabinets can achieve the same effect (photo below right).

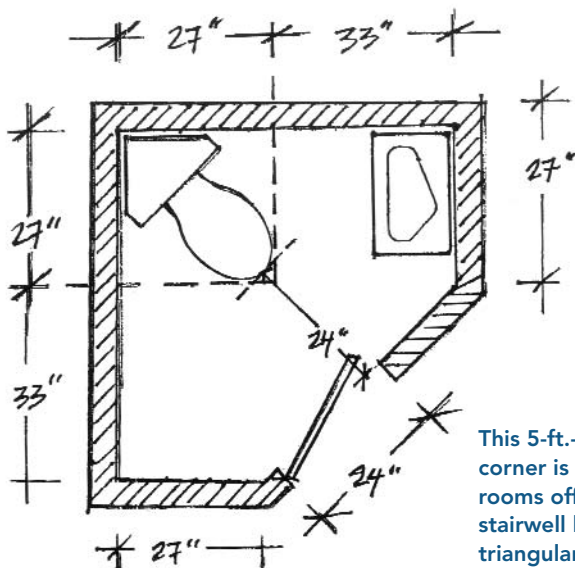
Lever-action faucets fit better on the small lavatories than do the faucets with dual controls. Kohler, American Standard, Hansgrohe, and Duravit offer many choices ("Sources," facing page). The pitcher-shaped Vas faucet by Kohler is an arresting change of pace that will dress up a powder room (photo p. 94). You can lose the lever entirely with Dornbracht's streamlined e-Mote, a faucet that is infrared-light activated.

If the site conditions entail the installation of the toilet in a corner of the powder room, be aware that the narrower the tank is, the closer the toilet will fit into the corner. Toto's one-piece toilets are a mere 16½ in. wide. And Eljer makes a toilet that has a triangular tank (photo facing page), which is ideal for use in this application. In the brave-new-world department, the NeoComby by Acorn Engineering joins the lavatory and the toilet at the hip (photo bottom left). Made of





## 5. TUCKED INTO A CORNER



This 5-ft.-sq. plan with a lopped-off corner is typical of interior powder rooms off a main hallway or a stairwell landing. A toilet with a triangular tank, such as Eljer's Patriot (photo above), fits handily into the far corner.



stainless steel, the NeoComby measures a compact 32 in. wide by 34 in. tall by 33 in. deep. The manufacturer's suggested retail price for the toilet/sink combo is \$5,352 (faucet and seat are extra).

Sometimes, just a couple of inches of clearance determines whether a half-bath gets built or washes out. Clever solutions such as recessing the toilet tank into the wall can bail you out. You can get toilet tanks designed specifically for this purpose (top photo, facing page). Another approach is to recess a standard toilet into the wall (photo above right).

For storage space, carve out some opportunities between the studs. The HY-DIT, for example, is a little cabinet that provides discreet storage in the wall for a toilet brush, plunger, and a jug of cleanser (photo right). □

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**Take advantage of the space between the studs.** Oregon builder Gordon Kadar saved some precious floor space by recessing his toilet's tank into the wall (photo above). The HY-DIT cabinet (photo left) provides compact storage for maintenance supplies (970-523-6935; [www.hy-dit.com](http://www.hy-dit.com)).

## SOURCES

### LAVATORIES, TOILETS, FAUCETS, HARDWARE

**Acorn Engineering**  
800-591-9050  
[www.neo-metro.com](http://www.neo-metro.com)

**American Standard**  
800-524-9797  
[www.americanstandard-us.com](http://www.americanstandard-us.com)

**Bates & Bates**  
800-726-7680  
[www.batesandbates.com](http://www.batesandbates.com)

**Dornbracht USA Inc.**  
800-774-1181  
[www.dornbracht.com](http://www.dornbracht.com)

**Duravit USA**  
888-387-2848  
[www.duravit.com](http://www.duravit.com)

**Elizabethan Classics**  
Faucet.com  
888-381-8837  
[www.faucet.com](http://www.faucet.com)

**Eljer Plumbingware Inc.**  
800-423-5537  
[www.eljer.com](http://www.eljer.com)

**Hansgrohe Inc.**  
800-719-1000  
[www.hansgrohe.com](http://www.hansgrohe.com)

**Kallista Inc.**  
888-452-5547  
[www.kallista.com](http://www.kallista.com)

**Kohler Co.**  
800-456-4537  
[www.kohler.com](http://www.kohler.com)

**Porcher Ltd.**  
800-359-3261  
[www.porcher-us.com](http://www.porcher-us.com)

**Robern Inc.**  
[www.robern.com](http://www.robern.com)

**Rocky Mountain Hardware**  
888-788-2013  
[www.rockymountainhardware.com](http://www.rockymountainhardware.com)

**Stone Forest**  
505-986-8883  
[www.stoneforest.com](http://www.stoneforest.com)

**Toto USA Inc.**  
770-282-8686  
[www.totousa.com](http://www.totousa.com)