

Sassafras Bath

BY GARRY MURPHY

Transom and interior windows let the sun shine into an accessible bathroom trimmed with a combination of durable woods

From the time it was built more than 100 years ago, this grand Kentucky farmhouse had belonged to only one family. Only a few changes had been made to the house, but none were pleasing to the home's first new owner. In one of the bedrooms, the windows had been covered with brick and plaster to create wall space for furniture. More recently, the entire second floor had been closed off from the rest of the house with a wall atop the open foyer staircase.

When our firm was hired to remodel the place, most of the work included reversing these and other changes that blocked the flow of sunlight. To our delight, we discovered that the original window sashes, jambs, and beautifully detailed interior shutters as well as most of the original interior casing and trim had been removed and stored in the attic.

We also added a full bathroom with a wheelchair-accessible shower and a laundry room on the second floor. Dividing one of the existing bedrooms provided plenty of space for both rooms. The trick was finding a way to bring natural light into the new space.

How a lackluster bedroom became a beautiful bath

The bedroom was large, almost 200 sq. ft., but uninteresting with one window, a small reach-in closet, and a jog in one of the walls created by the flue of a first-floor fireplace ("Before" floor plan, p. 62). We decided to use the interior half of the old bedroom for the bath so that it would be easily accessible to the entire second floor. Including a vanity, a toilet, and a reasonable amount of storage would be no problem. But with only tubs in the home's other bathrooms, the owner wanted a curbless, wheelchair-accessible shower in the new bath. Dividing the room with a straight



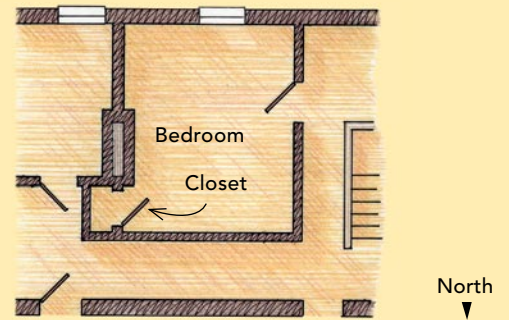
Wood where it belongs. Three types of wood were used as trim, each chosen based on its durability. The wettest areas, the shower bench and vanity top, are teak. Areas less likely to get wet, the shower trim and vanity cabinets, are sassafras. The built-in linen cabinet, which shouldn't see water at all, is made from maple and birch plywood. Photo taken at A on floor plan.



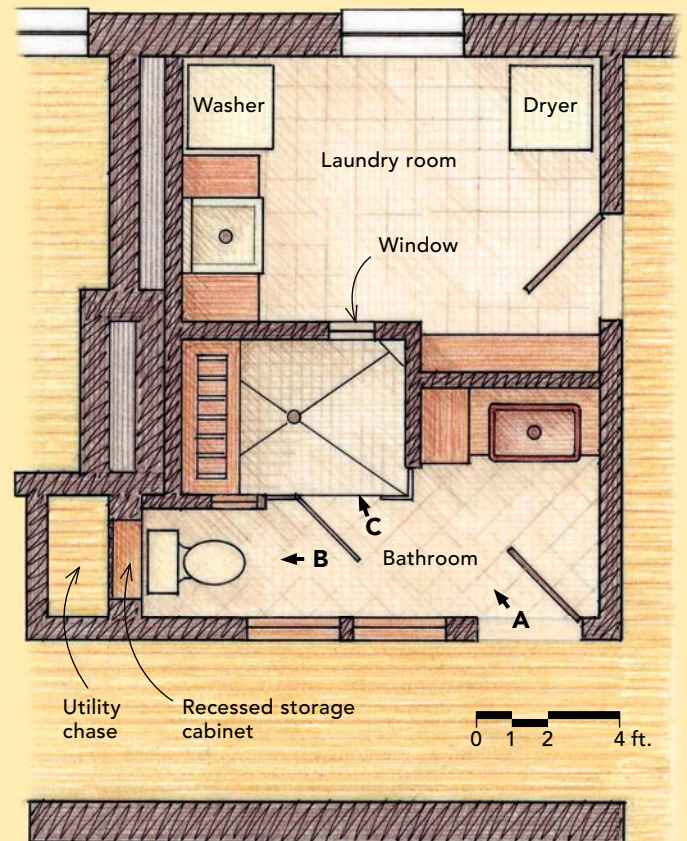
SQUEEZING IN A SPACIOUS SHOWER

Splitting a large bedroom into a bath and a laundry room was no problem. Still, it was important to make sure the bathroom was spacious and the laundry room convenient. Atop the homeowner's priorities and the largest single use of space was a comfortable, wheelchair-accessible shower. Wrapping the wall around the shower and stepping it back at the vanity was the perfect solution. The shower fit nicely, and the arrangement created a nook for utility shelves in the laundry room.

Before



After



Photos taken at lettered positions.

An alcove and a little extra storage. Below a pair of salvaged transom windows, the toilet sits in an alcove created by the shower wall. Recessed into space that was once a bedroom closet is a maple and birch-plywood cabinet, and a chase for utilities. For the inside of the cabinet and for the door panels, the builders used the birch plywood's "B" side because it had more-dramatic grain, similar to the maple frame. Photo taken at B on floor plan.



A look into what once was. The plan included shower walls that stop short of the ceiling for two reasons: to allow natural light to reach the bathroom and to hint at the scale of the original space. An interior window also lets sunlight into the shower and offers a view through the laundry room's south-facing window. Photo taken at C on floor plan.

wall was one solution, but the bathroom would have been larger than necessary and the more-utilitarian laundry room would have sacrificed convenience. Dividing the room with a jog in the wall was the ideal compromise.

On the far end of the bath, the 24-sq.-ft. shower stall pushes into the laundry room. On the near end, the vanity steps back into the bathroom and allows for added storage in the laundry ("After" floor plan, facing page). The toilet sits in an alcove next to the shower wall. Behind it, the old bedroom closet became a utility chase and the perfect spot to build a recessed cabinet for extra storage.

Transoms harvest natural light

With the space laid out, our next trick was to bring sunlight into the interior bathroom. Fortunately, the house has tall ceilings (over 10 ft.), and transoms were an obvious solution. We used them to create a number of different effects, capturing natural light all the while. The wall behind the sink and the vanity extends to the ceiling

with a fixed transom window. But a lowered ceiling over the area creates a comfortable nook and a place to install overhead lighting.

The wall in the back of the shower stops short of the ceiling and is open to the laundry room, which has a south-facing window. Again, this design was an attempt to bring light into the bath, but at the same time to let the volume of the original space read through the remodel. The wall at the front of the shower extends to the ceiling for rigidity, but also has an opening to let light filter into the toilet alcove. A window in the shower provides an outside view through the laundry-room window.

Finally, we salvaged two operable transom windows that we installed high in the wall separating the new bathroom from the hallway. These windows and the rest of the bathroom's illuminating details influenced our decision to build with warm materials.

Softening the bath with hardwoods

Commonly finished with tile, porcelain, stone, and glass, bathrooms tend to be covered in hard, durable surfaces. To take the edge off these surfaces and to add a sense of warmth to this bathroom, we used a combination of native and exotic woods for the trim and the cabinetry.

In areas most likely to get wet—the vanity top, the backsplash, and the shower bench—we used teak finished with Valspar Marine Teak Oil. In areas less likely to get wet, including door and drawer fronts, casings, and the trim at the top of the shower walls, we used local sassafras. Sassafras has a beautiful honey color and a distinctive grain, and it rivals other hardwoods in durability. We finished all the sassafras in the shop with Mohawk vinyl sealer and 40-sheen precatalyzed lacquer.

Finally, we used soft maple in areas with little chance of getting wet at all, including the recessed storage cabinet over the toilet. The cabinet and the two doors have birch-plywood panels trimmed with soft-maple frames. The "B" side of the birch plywood faces out, exposing its more-figured grain. This cabinet was also finished with Mohawk vinyl sealer and 40-sheen precatalyzed lacquer. The two salvaged transom windows and the transom above the vanity have soft-maple trim as well.

Although we used a variety of wood, the bathroom has few other finishes. All the hardware and fixtures are copper, including the hammered farm-style sink (www.stoneforest.com). The shower and floor tile is Ancient Jerusalem porcelain (www.ceramichlea.it), with 12-in. tiles laid diagonally on the bathroom floor, 2-in. tiles on the floor inside the shower, and 6-in. tiles in a running-bond pattern on the shower walls. For comfort, we installed an electric radiant-heat mat under the shower floor (www.suntouch.net). □

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