

AT HOME

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Photos by JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

The small master bathroom in the Glen Ellen home of Stephen and Christina Yingst was designed by Martha Channer and Craig Mitchell. One idea to make the most of the couple's space was to move the vanity into the corner of the room.

Big Ideas for a Small Bath

Colors, placement and other ways to make the most of an older home's claustrophobic space

By MEG MCCONAHEY
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

If you're like some homeowners with a modest three- or four-bedroom home, your full bath — with shower and/or tub — realistically is only about 35 to 40 square feet. It's tight but probably all you need.

And if your house was built in the 1990s or earlier, it's probably now due for a remodeling.

"People who have a particular space to work with often don't want to deal with the construction process or they are just hoping to improve what they have without huge expense," said Martha Channer, half of the Sebastopol design-duo of MC2.

That was the case with Christina Barasch and her husband, Stephen Yingst. The pair's 2,340-square-foot Glen Ellen home was built in 1966. They have been remodeling and updating it bit by bit as their budget allows.

Susan Whitney has a similar story. She bought her three-bedroom, two-bath home in Oakmont in 1995. She has been updating it, room by room, working with her trusted designer Neva Freeman of Neva B. Interior Design in Santa Rosa. For her master bathroom, she was looking for a more open feeling and more storage, all within the existing space.

The designers approached each challenge differently.

Barasch's call to Channer and her husband and partner Craig Mitchell for their master bath was a real 911.

"This bathroom was pretty horrendous. It was linoleum with this cabinet that was funky and a pinkish tile that is definitely not my color," said



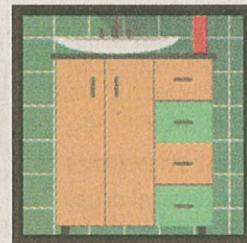
Designers Martha Channer and Craig Mitchell opened up the room by creating a bay window on the wall of the shower.

Barasch, a retired psychotherapist. The bathroom had received virtually no attention since it was built nearly a half-century ago.

Channer and Mitchell tackled the challenge by redesigning the room to orient from the corners and then incorporating a clever use of curves. The focal point is a contemporary, custom-made alder cabinet that swerves through a corner and offers open shelving as well as a closed cabinet and a drawer for storage. A cast concrete vanity top from Bohemian Stoneworks incorporates four colors of glass that themselves add depth and surface sheen.

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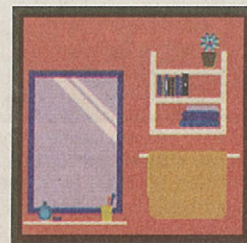
FINDING MORE 'SPACE'



Extra space: Look for hidden square footage behind a shower wall, in corners and cabinets.



Colors: Too many or too few colors make a room feel and look smaller. Three to five colors create the illusion of depth and more spacious.



Keep it simple: It's OK to be "matchy" with accessories in small spaces. It minimizes visual clutter.



Harmonizing: Simplify shapes and forms in the room by deciding on two compatible geometries, such as rectangles and circles, and staying with them.

BATH: Curves can actually be space-saving

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Corners are an overlooked solution and design element when every square foot counts, Channer said. They take advantage of an unused space, making a tiny room feel more spacious while adding a classy touch.

"The curve in architecture and design has always been the symbol of easy living and a cavalier disregard for spacial restraint," Channer said. "This is why curved pieces, which appear voluminous but are often actually space-saving, are perceived as luxurious."

Designers added a round vessel sink that sits atop the counter like a bowl, tying it into the other curvaceous elements.

Channer recommends looking for hidden and underused spaces. In the Barasch bathroom, she was able to annex about 2½ feet forgotten behind a wall that had a shower head on it. In the past, builders often made double walls between bathrooms, but better insulation and materials have rendered that unnecessary, she said.

The shower was designed for spatial economy both real and illusionary, with a compact corner seat built into the tile walls and a greenhouse garden window in the back that pushes out the space 2 feet while creating a perfect 36-by-34-inch space for plants.

Channer, an artist, created an original botanical painting that connects the vanity and the shower areas and reiterates the curvilinear, natural theme. For a color scheme, she chose a soft creamsicle orange with a tea green accent.

Freeman took a different approach for Susan Whitney's small bathroom. One of the most surprising elements is an oversized vanity that runs nearly the entire length of one wall. Conventional wisdom would suggest small furniture in smaller spaces, but Freeman says

that's not always true.

"Everyone tends to put small things in small spaces. And they put lots of small things in a small space. It makes it feel cluttered," Freeman said.

The large-scale cabinet works by creating a place for everything and eliminating clutter. When designing cabinets and vanities, Freeman finds out from clients precisely what they use in the bathroom, down to the size of the bottles, and then creates drawers and cabinets with the right depth to accommodate them.

Whitney's cabinet even includes drawers for her undergarments and jewelry — convenient for dressing — as well as a built-in hamper, eliminating one of those extra things that fill up and clutter a small room.

Freeman has also discovered a way to use that otherwise empty space

where the sink sits inside the cabinet with a "Vanity valet" that is revealed by pulling down a false drawer. It's a good spot to store blow dryers and curling irons. If you install outlets behind the cabinet, then the appliances can remain plugged in all the time and ready for use.

Another potential place for gaining more space is the bathtub. Whitney didn't use hers, so Freeman had it removed. Now she has a shower with glass doors that also fool the eye with a feeling of openness.

Like Channer, she incorporated a small, space-saving corner bench in the shower and built a niche into the tile for shampoo and other essentials.

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JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

The small bathroom in the Glen Ellen home of Stephen and Christina Yingst as seen looking from the shower.

SMALL BATHROOM DESIGN TIPS

Hidden space: Many small bathrooms (especially in older homes) have hidden square footage. Discover where hidden space lies behind a shower wall and look for wasted space in the corners and/or cabinets.

Less is more: When adding accessories, it's OK to be "matchy" in small spaces; this minimizes visual clutter. Also, stay away from lots of fabric, such as ruffled shower and window curtains. Stick with clean lines whether they are curved or straight.

Flow: Harmonize the shapes and forms in the room by deciding on two compatible geometries and staying with them. For example, rectangles and circles, or diamonds and squares. If you choose a round bowl sink, use arches (half-rounds) combined with rectangles that have rounded edges. Or if you prefer angles instead of curves, work with an angled sink and clean-lined edges. When the geometries match, it creates a harmonious and peaceful arrangement, which prevents too much visual chaos in a small space.

Expand mirrors to bring in more light and reflection: Use them on upper cabinet doors. Recessed mirror medicine cabinets

provide additional storage and now can be designed with frames, beveled mirrors, integrated lights and even electrical outlets for toothbrushes and shavers.

Towel bars: Mount them on the glass shower door when wall space is limited. Also consider robe hooks for hanging towels in a tiny space.

Glass shower walls: These can open up a space visually.

Windows: Fit in a window for fresh air and light.

Showers: Use shower space smartly with a corner bench and recessed niche for shampoo and razors.

Vanity storage: Make the vanity as functional as possible with a vanity valet made to fit the cabinet space around the sink, and a pull-out hamper.

SOURCES:

MC2 The Science of Design: 888-4856, 619-865-7885 or info@mctwdesign.com.

Neva B Interior Design: 575-5811 or neva.com.