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Renovating a Bathroom? Experts Share Their Secrets.

The Fix

By MICHELLE HIGGINS SEPT. 30, 2016



When making over a bathroom, generally an expensive proposition, save money by not changing the layout.
Credit: Linda Jaquez for The New York Times

New bathrooms don't come cheap.

The average cost of a midrange bathroom renovation — replacing all the fixtures, the tile, the vanity and the toilet — is now almost \$19,000, according to Remodeling magazine, which tracks the cost of home improvement projects

annually. And that's the nationwide average. If you live in New York City, count on spending closer to \$25,000.

If you're planning a high-end remodel that involves moving fixtures and installing amenities like heated floors, it will cost you more than \$60,000 on average — and in New York City, upward of \$72,000.

Still, there are ways to keep costs down. Interior designers and building professionals offered some tips on how to save money without sacrificing style.



Go for high-quality faucets, the simpler the better. Tile only the shower, not the entire room.
Credit: Trevor Tondro for The New York Times

LIMIT THE USE OF TILE Because tile can be expensive — and labor even more so — Pamela Dailey, an interior designer in Beacon, N.Y., sometimes uses it only in the shower, where she lays a simple subway tile in a staggered pattern up to the ceiling.

And instead of edging it with a border tile, she substitutes polished aluminum trim by Schluter to hide unglazed tile edges. It starts at about \$8 for an eight-foot-long metal strip at Home Depot, she said, and offers “a clean, timeless look.”

LOOK FOR LEFTOVERS Don't pay for an entire slab of granite when all you need is a small piece to cover the top of a vanity. Stone fabricators like SMC

Stone in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and BCG Marble and Granite Fabricators in Hackensack, N.J., often sell remnants.

The same goes for tile: Dawn DeLuca, a principal at Camille Rossy Cabinetry & Design, said she looks for closeouts at stores like Tiles Unlimited in Glendale, Queens, and on sites like Tilebar.com, where overstocked and discontinued lines are sold for as much as 80 percent off. Ms. DeLuca added that it pays to ask about closeouts at any remodeling store you happen to visit. “Don’t be shy,” she said. “If you see a showroom changing displays, run in! They will be happy to sell display models at steep discounts — everything from vanities to toilet bowls.”

And don’t forget about Craigslist, where contractors and do-it-yourselfers often sell surplus. One recent listing offered 84 Bianco Carrara marble subway tiles for \$50 with the following message: “Accidentally purchased what we needed in sq. ft. instead of linear ft. ... oops! Selling what we didn’t need at half price.”



Replace a boring old medicine cabinet with a handsome mirror.
Credit: Bruce Buck for The New York Times

LOSE THE MEDICINE CABINET “I opt, whenever possible, for a decorative mirror instead of a medicine cabinet,” said Kelly Giesen, the founder of Kelly G Design in Manhattan. “A mirror adds style to the space and opens up a wide choice of price options. You can also go as big as the room will support, so the space ends up looking bigger and more grand.”

HIT THE FLEA MARKET Ms. Giesen recently found a small iron table for \$125 this way, and plans to use it as a sink console. “The style is unique and special,” she said. “And perfect for a bath, without breaking the bank.” Just be sure to

measure your flea market finds before buying, to ensure they're the right height, width and depth for your bathroom.

CONSIDER THE COST OF LABOR “Most people think about saving on material,” said Raf Howery, the chief executive of the home-remodeling site Kukuln, but they forget that labor can account for as much as 40 percent of the overall budget. Keeping the bathroom layout the same, so you don't have to move the plumbing, and “choosing products that do not require a huge amount of installation labor,” Mr. Howery said, are some of the best ways to keep costs down.

Cindy Albert, a designer at New Life Bath & Kitchen in Santa Maria, Calif., offered an example: Instead of spending \$1,400 on tile for a recent bathroom renovation, she spent \$2,000 on wall panels from Kohler's Choreograph line. The panels cost more, she explained, but because they took less time to install, her client saved about \$2,500 on labor.

AVOID “BUILDER GRADE” FIXTURES “Builder grade” and “contractor grade” are marketing terms for the most basic fixtures in a product line. And in this case, you get what you pay for: They tend to be made of less durable parts and can “scratch and wear more quickly,” said Leonard Kady, an architect in New York. Investing in a higher-grade fixture may cost more up front, but it could save you money in the long term. You may not see the words “builder grade” on the box, Mr. Kady added, but “salespeople will let you know, as a point of comparison.” Another clue: “The higher end tends to be heavier and feel solid.”

KEEP IT SIMPLE The number of handles required to operate the temperature and flow of the water in your shower and tub may not be high on your list of renovation priorities, but all those parts add up. “More valves equal higher costs,” Mr. Kady said. A pressure balance valve with a single handle to control both the water temperature and flow is often cheaper than a thermostatic valve with two or more handles. “Each valve has to be separately installed, and plumbing pipes have to meet those valves, which adds labor costs,” he said. “That's why fewer is better.”

When it comes to finishes, standard polished chrome is typically less expensive than other options. Kohler's Bancroft valve trim and handle in polished chrome, for example, sells for \$244. The same model in brushed nickel costs \$355.

And if you have your heart set on an expensive material like marble, consider using it as an accent rather than covering the entire bathroom in it. That's what Marica McKeel, the founder of Studio MM, a Manhattan architecture firm, suggested when her client fell in love with a \$20-a-square-foot marble tile and “had to have it” wall-to-wall in a large bathroom. Using the marble on the floor, and a simple white subway tile in the shower, “not only saved our client more than \$1,600,” Ms. McKeel said, “it allowed the marble tile to stand out and become the star of the show.”