

YOUR PLACE

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Shower conversions turn an ordinary tub into a spa experience

By Elizabeth Brewster

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Lincolnwood homeowner Deb Machalinski still hasn't tried the luxurious steam shower she installed in her first-floor bathroom last summer.

But unlike the little-used bathtub it replaced, the walk-in steam shower is a big hit with the men of the house — her husband and two teenage sons.

"I was absolutely reluctant about that steam shower — how often would it really be used?" she says, adding that she also feared the extra moisture it generated would be hard on their newly remodeled bathroom.

But Machalinski did her homework and ended up with a porcelain-tiled shower that can function as either a regular or steam shower, with plenty of room for her tall husband and sons to comfortably move around in.

"We found a supplier of Italian porcelain that looked like limestone [for the shower], and that was the beginning of the whole thing," she says. "Everything in the bathroom is pretty and clean — there's no muck."

Swapping a traditional tub-shower combo for a souped-up, stand-alone shower is one of the hottest trends in bathroom design as consumers look for ways to create a spa-like atmosphere in bathrooms.



Photo for the Tribune by Warren Skalski

The super shower in Marilee Unruh's basement is an open design with no doors.

Real estate pros say it's important to keep at least one bathtub in your home for resale value, but homeowners with multiple full baths often prefer showers in the master bath and in bathrooms used by overnight guests. In fact, nearly 32 percent of households that remodeled a full bath in 2007 added a separate

shower stall, up from 28 percent in 2006, according to the National Kitchen & Bath Association.

With average tabs for bathroom remodeling ranging from \$16,000 to \$50,000-plus, according to Remodeling Magazine's 2007 Cost Versus Value Report, homeowners are looking for luxu-

ry features they can indulge in every day.

"Ten or 15 years ago, everyone put in the big whirlpool tubs. They took up a lot of space, and people never used them or used them infrequently," says Janice Costa, author of "Grand Master Baths" and editor of Kitchen & Bath Design News.

"The shower industry has caught on to this desire for luxury and created 'super showers,' so you can get the luxury whirlpool experience without having to wait 20 minutes for the tub to fill. When people want to upgrade their bathrooms and don't have [extra] space, more and more we're seeing them give up the tub for the super shower."

And this new generation of showers is easier to customize to homeowners' tastes, Costa says. "About three years ago, we really started seeing an upgrade in shower technology. You can place [water] jets where you want them [on shower walls] . . . and it's a lot easier now to have a hand shower and a showerhead without even changing out the plumbing significantly," she said.

Selecting a showerhead is more draining than it used to be, however, thanks to the deluge of new options, say experts.

"There's every water usage device

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you can think of — overhead drenching showers, very large showerheads, multiple body sprays, steamers," says Robert Lando, president of Community Home Supply on Chicago's North Side. "Separate hand showers can be used for the elderly, for those more comfortable sitting in a shower, for washing young children's hair, even for cleaning the shower stall itself."

Taking the tub out of the equation also leaves room for the little extras that can make showering more comfortable, says Elmwood Park designer Pamela Polvere, such as a built-in tiled or stone bench and recessed alcoves for shelving.

"In showers that don't have room for a bench, we've been putting in a toe niche—a little tiled-over hole about two feet off the floor where you can stick your toe while you shave your legs," she adds. "We're also doing some really cool metal shelves that get mounted directly into the tile [on the shower wall]. Some even have a little hook for your razor as well."

Stand-alone showers do tend to be more expensive than tub-shower combos, says Polvere, because homeowners usually put in a glass enclosure or door rather than a shower curtain, and because constructing a sloped tile shower base involves more labor than installing a bathtub.

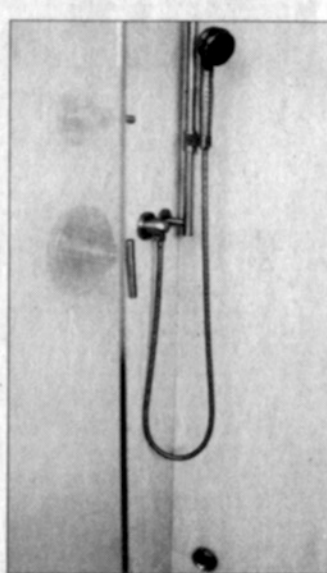
"Pricing a shower depends on how elaborate you want to get," says Lando. "A custom shower base, nice tile on the walls and a thicker clear glass enclosure" are more expensive options than a

pre-made acrylic or cast-iron shower base, simple ceramic tiles and a framed enclosure, he says.

Pricier showers with multiple jets and larger showerheads also may require alterations to your existing plumbing, says Lando. "It's very important to have sufficient water service coming to that shower to operate it. It has to be piped properly to get an equal amount of water coming out of every body spray. And Chicago has a relatively low water pressure compared to the rest of the country.

"You've also got to have sufficient water heating capacity to run the shower," he says, adding that tankless water heaters, which use electricity or gas to heat only the water being used, can often be integrated with the existing water source for the shower.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of taking the shower out of the tub is the freedom to



A hand-held shower that attaches to an adjustable bar can be used for conventional showers.

customize to the limits of your space and pocketbook. River Forest homeowner Marilee Unruh, for instance, designed the new basement

shower in her split-level house with her 10-year-old son in mind.

"I was looking for him to [be able to] come in the garage entrance, walk directly through the laundry room, dropping his clothes as he went, and then into the shower," she says, adding that the shower doesn't even have a door (a raised lip at the entrance contains moisture).

But the single mom had a little fun with the shower, too, adding hand-painted tiles in an abstract pattern on the back wall, using penny rounds to tile the walls and built-in bench, and installing a rainfall-style showerhead.

"It's really a semi-wet room," she says. "With all the space that you can use for [just] the shower, you can do something really cool."

A handheld showerhead, however, was off limits: "With a 10-year-old boy, that might be too risky," she says.