THE PERFECT BATH

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In my office, we create what I often characterize as traditional houses designed for the ways in which people live in the modern world. Our work includes both the revitalization and reinvention of historic structures, and also what might be described as "new old houses"—new works of architecture for which we devise plausible narratives about how they could have developed over time.

MODERN BATHS, TRADITIONAL CONTEXTS

Whether clients come to us for an actual old house or a new version, the bath is one of the key elements requiring rethinking for modern life, as the baths in historic residences were typically small, occasionally windowless, function-driven spaces that offered little of what we seek in baths today. While some people favor very contemporary baths that contrast with their historic surroundings, I prefer to find ways to design baths that are in harmony with a larger traditional context.

THE LUXURY OF SPACE

Though my clients seldom use the word *luxury*, their desire for it is implicit, albeit with a large measure of subtlety, and we find that we define the word differently for different parts of a house. In the bath, luxury first and foremost equals *space*—indeed, one of the biggest challenges we encounter when renovating prewar apartments is that, while the public rooms are typically quite generously proportioned, the baths are dismayingly compact, and correspondingly difficult to expand.

By contrast, in a house setting, tradition is on our side, because in truly historic homes, you discover that baths were often inserted into spaces that were originally used for other purposes, such as bedrooms or dressing rooms, and so are considerably larger than would normally have been the case. Thus, whether a house is new or old, we try to make the baths a little bigger than they need to be, which at once provides the luxury of space and allows you to place furniture in it along with the fixtures. It also sends a subliminal message about the structure's historical narrative.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Though the window in the niche looks into a stairwell, it both opens up the bath and gives it architecture. ABOVE: Schafer has articulated this tub niche with paneling and strong molding that frame the experience. OPPOSITE: The elaborate gilt mirror hangs in front of a window, yet it extends the depth of the room and creates a sense of procession.

TAKING ARCHITECTURAL ADVANTAGE

The language of moldings, paneling, and architectural ornament and detail also works to our advantage, in part by investing the bath with a formal (but not stuffy) elegance that is not incompatible with the idea of luxury, but also, in practical terms, by giving an architect more ways to conceal creatively the lavish amounts of storage space that clients typically demand. And a bath that draws in the architectural rigor of the surrounding rooms sends the message that it is not, in a house's hierarchy, a second-class citizen—if you took out the sink and tub, it could serve as a sitting room.

LIGHT AND CONNECTIVITY

After space, the great luxury associated with the modern bath is natural light, which in my palette is tied to connectivity. The idea of rooms that flow into one another—as opposed to being clearly separated into front- and back-of-house zones, as they were in older homes—is certainly a contemporary one. Yet we can give it a classical spin by embracing the idea of axes and cross-axes: connections that extend not only from room to room, but out into the landscape. Traditional houses were typically slender in plan, often no more than a single room in width, to facilitate natural illumination and ventilation; with this in mind, if I am designing a bath that is buried in the center of a deeper plan, axial and cross-axial connections to windows and French doors can make the space feel less "landlocked."

Though this bath is part of a new home, Schafer designed it specifically to look as though the room had been repurposed—a way of building narrative and history into a contemporary residence.

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: Schafer has layered a number of elements into a narrow niche—a washstand, flanking sconces, a mirror, and a matchstick shade, and all before a window—yet the outcome is lively and urbane rather than busy or cramped. The basket-weave-patterned section of the floor simulates an area rug.

A WING OF ITS OWN

If the opportunity presents itself, I will set the master bath in its own small wing off the bedroom or dressing room, which enables me to bring in light on several sides while also connecting the bath to the adjoining rooms. Many couples with busy schedules tell me they often use the time when they're bathing or dressing to "catch up," and thus I use these axes to connect his-and-hers baths and dressing rooms to each other, as well as to the garden and grounds beyond. Natural light, the presence of the landscape outside, and long sightlines combine to create a sense of luxury and a subtle classical grandeur that seems all the more enjoyable for being relaxed and natural.

USING THE GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES

While my office extensively re-plans old houses to render them programmatically suitable to contemporary life–bearing in mind that such indispensable spaces as family rooms and eat-in kitchens didn't exist a century ago–we are nonetheless often confronted with existing conditions that cannot be changed. When this happens, I find that it is best not to fight the situation, but to use the architectural and historic context as inspiration–to create a story that blends in with the rest of the house and makes the problem the generator of the solution.

A good example of this strategy can be seen in a grand late nineteenth-century Victorian in southern Maine that we were engaged to restore and update. There was a large closet that my client wanted to convert into a fun and special bath for her young boys, but it could not reasonably be enlarged. The room featured an oval-shaped window that struck me as an obstacle–until I remembered the Captain Nemo book I'd read and enjoyed as a child. Realizing that the era of Jules Verne was contemporaneous with the house, I felt that–though I'm allergic to architectural gimmickry or kitsch–my memories of Nemo's submarine, the *Nautilus*, and the design language it inspired could somehow be authentically true to the house. And so the oval window became the famous porthole on the *Nautilus* in a bath featuring nickel strapping, back-painted glass, and fish wallpaper suggested by my client.

The room is a one-off, of course. But it demonstrates that whether a traditional house is old or new, open to reinterpretation or tightly constrained, the bath can be a spacious, light-filled, and even whimsical space conducive to modern-day comfort and pleasure–even as it exists effortlessly within the context of tradition.

Schafer's own bath evinces an appealing masculine clubbiness. Especially felicitous is the repurposing of a vintage furniture piece for the sink. The bamboo chair and towel étagère and wicker basket add warmth and texture.