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Photo: Dag Larson

# Weighing in on Wellness

Designers discuss the growing importance of health and wellbeing to their clients and how they incorporate design elements, products and finishes to support it within their primary bathrooms.

BY KIM BERNDTSON

**F**or most people, their lives are more challenging today than they were just a few years ago. Demanding jobs, a highly divided political environment, inflation, navigating the pandemic as well as recovering from COVID itself is taking a toll on the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of nearly everyone.

To help their clients cope, this month *Kitchen & Bath Design News* asked designers to share their thoughts about wellness and how they can improve it within their homes.

## WRAPPED IN LIGHT

Many of Momoko Morton Wong's clients have stressful jobs and are looking for ways to improve wellness at home. As that relates to their primary bathrooms, she often gets requests for designs that feel like a sanctuary, with improved functionality that allows them to enjoy their space.

"[Since COVID] people are investing more in their homes," says the principal designer/founder of Momo Design in

Denver, CO. "Being at home has really made them think about how they live, and they have become much more thoughtful about what they need to make their spaces function better."

One of the first wellness considerations that Wong likes to incorporate relates to light, both natural and artificial.

"I love, love, love natural light," she enthuses. "It's nice in the morning to be wrapped with sunlight, but really good artificial light is important, too, so the space is well lit at night."

With regard to natural illumination, plentiful windows are an obvious first choice but, when possible, Wong likes to utilize skylights as well. In one recent remodel, two skylights are a solution for the relatively small primary bathroom on the second floor of an historic 1905 home. Located in the shower on a sloped ceiling, they help create a feeling of more headspace and visually brighten the space, while a glass-pane shower enclosure makes it feel more open.

"I don't like to do walled-in showers," she adds. "With glass,

Photo: Eleanor Williamson



Photo: Doug Larson



Photo: Eleanor Williamson



■ This primary bathroom, designed by Momoko Morton Wong, includes several elements that promote wellness, such as the wet room, shower bench and skylight.

■ Momoko Morton Wong focused on natural materials in the renovation of her own primary bathroom. A wet room (*far left*) that promotes family bathing and enhances a couple's intimacy is also included.

■ Momoko Morton Wong likes to incorporate natural light whenever possible. In this recent remodel, (*upper left*) two skylights in the shower are a solution for the relatively small primary bathroom.

you can see all the way through. It makes the room feel larger because there aren't any visual obstructions."

When the glass runs to the ceiling, such as in this bathroom, Wong keeps a portion of the enclosure open for ventilation so the shower can dry properly.

"That's another part of wellness...mitigating moisture so the environment is clean and free of mold," she explains. "Performance is a driving tenant of wellness. We need to include elements that perform well without any cleaning issues."

Wet rooms are another wellness element that Wong often utilizes. It's one that, given her Asian heritage, hits close to home.

"I'm half Japanese and I grew up in Tokyo in the summers," she explains. "It's a very Japanese notion to have a wet room with the tub and shower concealed behind glass."

Wong indicates that a wet room's wellness benefits stem from its ability to promote family bathing and enhance a couple's intimacy.

"Many countries have deep, long bathing cultures," she remarks. "They embrace the idea of bathing to cleanse the body and mind. Americans are often so rushed. We don't slow down and enjoy those luxuries, so a wet room can encourage people to take a little more time. It's so lovely to have a place to enjoy at the end of the day to decompress, to wash the body of impurities and prepare oneself for sleep."

Natural elements, including wood and stone, are additional elements that Wong embraces to promote wellness.

"They add a warmth to the space that psychologically makes us feel cozy," she explains.

The designer focused on natural materials in the renovation of her own primary bathroom where maple floors – an original element to the former sleeping porch – combine with wood vanities, wood-framed mirrors, teak shower benches and a petite furniture storage piece to ground the space.



Photos: Robert Norman Photography

“Shower stools or benches are a great addition for even small bathrooms,” she says. “A small teak stool doesn’t take up much space and it can easily be removed from the shower if someone prefers not to use it.”

As a final layer, Wong considers wellness of the earth via the use of green products when possible.

“For painted cabinetry or walls, I encourage the use of low VOC paint,” she reports. “And for cabinetry, I like to use products that are free from formaldehyde and are sourced from sustainable forests. With regard to toilets and showerheads, I encourage low-flow models. They admittedly don’t provide a rush of water, but we live in Colorado and we are often in a drought. It is critical for us to think beyond our wellness to wellness of the earth, so I like to educate my clients about green sustainable finishes as options.”

### FOCUSING ON THE SHOWER

Requests for primary bathrooms with a spa-like vibe aren’t necessarily anything new for Jonathan Gordon, founder/lead designer for Design by the Jonathans in New Haven, CT. However, he senses a change in the motivation behind those requests.

“It used to be that people wanted the spa-like feel for relaxation,” he notes. “Now, they want it for wellness.”

Admittedly, wellness is complicated and it means different things to different people, he indicates.

“For some, it’s a blood work score on a piece of paper,” he states. “For others, it’s about how they feel. Are they rested and ready to take on the day in the morning? Are they beat down and defeated at the end of the day? Do they have aches and pains? Are they mentally well? For many, it’s a combination of all of these...mental, emotional and physical.”

Gordon attributes the shift towards wellness to a variety of causes, ranging from political unrest to the COVID pandemic and even a general sense of dread.

“Wellness has become so important because there are so many people who are unwell,” he observes. “The past few years have been very trying...for nearly everybody, in every sector. No

Jonathan Gordon’s clients are focusing on their home environments and are asking for elements, products and finishes that improve wellness. As their needs are varied, so are his solutions, which in this primary bathroom includes heated towel racks.

Requests for primary bathrooms with a spa-like vibe aren’t anything new for designers at Design by the Jonathans. In this bathroom, designer Lana Nguyen accomplished that with a large walk-in shower with a bench and multiple showerheads.

matter who you are or what you do, generally, in these times, people aren’t feeling as well as they did a few years ago.”

In response, Gordon’s clients are focusing on their home environments and are asking for elements, products and finishes that improve wellness. As their needs are varied, so are his solutions. Some find comfort in modern design while others feel better with a shabby chic or biophilic vibe. But overwhelmingly, he finds an overarching emphasis on the shower.

In particular, rain showerheads are commonplace. For the ultimate in luxury, oversized versions are especially indulgent.

Shower benches are another key design element.

“The most important thing in the shower is a bench,” he says. “The minute you have a place to sit down, the space becomes a room...a living space. A living room, dining room and bedroom all have a place to sit down. In a kitchen, there’s typically island seating. In the bathroom the only sitting anyone does is utilitarian, so when you add a bench in the shower, it becomes a part of your life. It’s less utilitarian.”

Complementing the bench with a rain showerhead above is a distinctive design feature that Gordon is implementing more frequently.

“We recently finished building my house and my bathroom was a case study,” he explains. “The second I sat on the bench and turned on the rain showerhead, I knew I needed to do this for my clients.

“It gives you permission to sit under your own private waterfall,” he reasons. “If you’ve ever sat underneath a waterfall, you know that eventually you have to move on because others want to experience it, too. But when you have that feeling within your own shower, you don’t have to move on until you’re ready. I find that it relaxes me and helps me unwind at the end of the day. It increases my health and happiness. The first thing I want to do after a really long work day is hop in the shower, sit on my bench under my rain showerhead and let all the stress of the day melt away.”

Bidet toilets, heated floors and towel racks, recirculating hot water pumps and powerful exhaust fans are more frequent requests, as well.

“Heated floors are great for people who have cold feet or circulation issues,” he explains. “Really good air flow, circulation and ventilation is important for health as well to prevent mold buildup. It addresses wellness in a different way.”

### BRINGING SELF CARE HOME

When the world shut down in response to COVID, many of Lindsie Davis’ clients could no longer go to their dermatology appointments or the spa so they began searching for ways to bring those selfcare and wellness services home.

“My clients could no longer do the things they normally took care of outside the home...they all had to come inside,” says the principal designer/owner of Blueberry Jones Design in Wimberley, TX. “At that point, we really started focusing in on how our environments affect us...both our moods and our physical wellbeing. Our goal has always been to design spaces that reflect our clients, but now it became even more important to ensure their daily needs were met.”

For many, that fulfillment begins by including a steam shower, which is admittedly easier in new construction homes in which Davis often works.

“Most every client I work with now asks for a steam shower as a way to relax and end the day,” she reports. “They often go to the gym or a spa to meditate and release stress from daily life. With a steam shower, they can do that at home.”

Other water features such as rain showerheads, body sprays and hand-held showerheads are top of mind, too, and Davis has been spending a lot more time talking to clients about toilets, especially those with bidets and heated seats. Tubs have become more of a conversation point as well, especially oversized models and stone units, which offer an advantage of heat retention. Freestanding tubs are still prevalent, but when clients request a built-in, it is much more streamlined and simplistic compared to their ‘90s counterparts...even when airjets are included.

“Clients used to be content with just about any tub,” she indicates. “But now they want to actually go to the showroom and try out different ones.”

Davis also finds that providing adequate storage can affect wellness since clutter can increase anxiety and stress.

“I always like to look at my clients’ bathrooms before we do a renovation or new construction [project]...and I don’t want them to clean them first!” she says. “That helps me determine how to give them the best storage, especially for their everyday items so they are easy to get to without being on the counter.”

As such, she utilizes storage solutions such as cabinetry pullouts with outlets and niches in the shower that she customizes for the size of product bottles. For clients who may want to keep a few items out and accessible for daily use, she often builds a shallow ledge, about 4" deep, that sits at the top of the backsplash, at a height of about 8" to 10".

“Items can be left out, but they aren’t taking up space on the counter,” she explains.

Material selection also influences wellness, with natural and organic finishes, including wood and natural stone, frequently being specified.

“I often try to bring in wood tones, whether that’s with a beam or cabinetry...really anything that brings the outdoor feeling inside,” she says. “That touch of nature, even in a modern space, is important to prevent the bathroom from feeling sterile or cold.”

As it relates to natural stone, honed marble was the material of choice in one recent project where Davis used the stone throughout the bathroom, varying the size and layout to add interest.

“It feels like you’re being hugged by nature with the beautiful stone,” she relates.



Photos: Avery Nicole Photography



❏ Lindsie Davis indicates that material selection influences wellness, with natural and organic finishes frequently being specified. Honed marble was the choice in this primary bathroom, where she used the stone throughout the bathroom (top).

❏ Clients are asking Lindsie Davis about tubs, and she often uses over-sized models and stone units, such as the one in this bathroom. To reduce clutter, she incorporates hidden storage as well shallow ledges that sit at the top of the backsplash.

➤ Creating a more spa-like environment needn't be cost prohibitive, indicates Brett Primack, who designed this primary bathroom with large walk-in shower and bench.



Photo: courtesy of Brett Primack

Other clients interpreted natural and organic at the opposite end of the spectrum, going deep and dark with emerald green/black tile in the shower that encases them in serenity and reminds them of a lagoon. For contrast, graphic porcelain tile on the floor serves as an element of energy.

"They previously had a bathroom with white subway tile," the designer relates. "My clients always felt that it was too bright for them. While a lot of people lean to the light, bright and airy feel, that isn't what these clients wanted. I, myself, have a black onyx shower because white isn't calming for me either. For these clients, they wanted to ease into the morning. Wellness is about what makes us healthy and happy, and that's different for everyone."

#### ADDRESSING ALL PRICE POINTS

Brett Primack recently had a client visit his showroom looking for a tub that could accommodate her tall stature and meet her wellness needs.

"Her primary focus in the entire bathroom was finding a tub that suited her," says the owner of Las Vegas Remodel & Construction in Henderson, NV. "She had several back surgeries so she needed something special."

The final selection was a rather expensive, well-appointed, oversized 72"x42" airjet/whirlpool tub with keypad control and built-in heater. Its linear lines and Zen appeal certainly fit the aesthetic of the renovation, but more importantly, its 122 airjets and eight fully adjustable hydromassage jets spoke to her wellness concerns.

Admittedly, only a relatively small percentage of Primack's clients has as generous a budget that can accommodate such a luxurious, high-priced bathtub. Yet wellness is still a top priority for many, coming in second only to safety.

"[Addressing] wellness is a challenge," he stresses. "I can talk about wellness features all day, but not everyone has a huge budget so we have to listen to each client's specific needs and pick and choose what is most important."

Fortunately, the contractor/designer can indulge even modest budgets.

"Sometimes it's as simple, and cost conscious, as a showerhead," he says. "There are manufacturers that offer showerheads that are therapeutic, without using much water."

Lighting can also be an inexpensive way to address wellness, he indicates, stressing the importance of matching the Kelvin rating of the bulb to the colors used within the space.

"Lighting can be harsh on the eyes and on the mind," he explains, "so I match the color of the lighting to the color of the room, meaning cooler lights are used with whites and grays, and warmer lights are used with neutral tans and beiges."

Creating a more spa-like environment in the shower also needn't be cost prohibitive, he notes.

"Larger walk-in showers with a low or no curb, a bench and a dry-off area can cost a bit more than a basic shower, but they don't have to be over the top," he explains.

Adding a digital shower system increases cost a bit more, but the wellness benefits it offers can make the expense justifiable given its ability to customize the shower experience to each user. Incorporating lighting and music control further enhances the wellness factor.

Outside of the shower, Primack suggests options such as touchless toilets, which even he found useful after recently breaking his leg.

"I was limited in mobility and the touchless toilet was easier for me to use," he relates, noting that additional toilet features such as bidets, warming seats and lights can also enhance wellness. "Toilet conversations are definitely becoming more important."

Additionally, heated floors – even in his desert location – are frequent requests, as are heated towel bars. The former takes the chill off cold tile and is a popular feature that is on display in his showroom.

"It's very inviting...even in the summer," he says. ■