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A pop of color set within a neutral foundation was the focus of this spa escape bathroom designed by Lana Nguyen in collaboration with Hovan Brothers Construction Group. This client loves pink and wanted a feminine bathroom that showcased the hue but wasn't too girly. A pair of vessel sinks, gold-tone plumbing fixtures and hardware and arches throughout deliver the desired look.

Photos: Robert Norman Photography

# Reimagining the Spa Bath

In a world where everyone and everything is moving fast, today's primary bathrooms are built to care for the wellbeing of the mind, body and soul.

BY KIM BERNDTSON

Primary baths with a spa-like aesthetic are not necessarily a new concept. In truth, designers have been talking about them for quite some time now. However, more recently when discussing these spaces, the focus has shifted – especially since the beginning of the COVID pandemic. Instead of being centered around relaxation as they once were, spa-inspired baths have evolved to also include a focus on the wellbeing of the mind, body and soul.

This month, *KBDN* asked designers to share their thoughts as well as some projects that highlight the evolution of spa-style design.

## PERSONALIZED INTERPRETATIONS

With a background in hospitality design, Lana Nguyen has seen the influence travel has had on residential design, especially as it relates to the spa-style bathrooms she now designs as senior designer at Design by the Jonathans in New Haven, CT.

“Spa-like design has been a ‘thing’ in hotels, and as people travel and experience those environments and see what is possible, they want to incorporate that aesthetic into their homes,” she relates. “People lead such busy, hectic lives now and they really want more peaceful and calm environments. Also, early-on in the COVID pandemic, when everyone was at home,



The vanity in this bathroom, designed by Lana Nguyen, is painted a saturated teal blue and is topped with marble that features an ogee edge and ornate backsplash. Set within a niche framed with warm wood and accented with gold-colored wallpaper, its ability to shine is granted by the calm, neutral palette of the rest of the room.

we started to consider bringing the spa experience home. I do see the word ‘spa’ used a lot in relationship to the bathroom because of its connection to self-care, but I do see it happening in other spaces within the home, too.”

The designer does see some generalities in what the word ‘spa’ means to her clients, such as a desire for natural or natural-look materials, monochromatic palettes, texture and warmer tones. An overall openness and simplicity are common themes as are abundant storage and large showers. Heated towel racks, smart toilets and bidets add to the luxury. However, clients’ specific interpretations of these generalities are quite personal, as illustrated in three recent renovations where each has a fundamental goal of being a spa escape, but is carried out in vastly different ways.

For example, one couple selected materials and finishes that reside within the same general color palette as the foundation for their spa escape, where the color of the porcelain tiles in the shower is similar to the floor, the vanity top and the tub surround.

“It’s very Armani-esque...very neutral and simple,” she says, noting a collaboration with Harbor Property Development.

Key considerations for these clients were the tub and the vanity. Sited beneath a window, the built-in tub bucks the trend that typically calls for its removal. However, Nguyen updated its look by encasing it in stone so it looks like a waterfall.

“It is much more contemporary and upscale,” she remarks. “And by giving her a ledge, the client can sit down and rotate safely into the tub.”

As well, the design of the floating vanity follows function first, without forgoing form.

“These clients needed a lot of storage,” Nguyen relates, adding that additional storage was created with the medicine cabinets/mirrors, floating shelves and built-in open shelves. “Creating enough storage so a space doesn’t look busy and



Lana Nguyen selected materials and finishes that reside within the same general color palette as the foundation for this spa escape bathroom, where the color of the porcelain tiles that clad the shower walls is similar to the floor, the vanity top and the tub surround.

cluttered is one of the most important factors in creating a spa design, especially when a space is neutral and simple.”

Pops of color set within a neutral foundation were the focus of two spa-escape bathrooms designed by Nguyen in collaboration with Hovan Brothers Construction Group. One client, a single woman who loves pink, wanted a feminine bathroom that showcased the hue but wasn’t too girly. While the wood used in the floating vanity and floating shelves tie the bathroom to the rest of the home, many other elements are unique to the room, including the warm pink tile that clads the walls of the combo tub/shower and accents the arch.

“She absolutely loves arches!” Nguyen adds. “We used them in several different ways to add softness to the room.”

Light-colored paint on the walls coordinates with the wallpaper, wall cabinetry and quartz vanity top, which features a thick mitered edge for a luxurious, modern aesthetic. A pair of vessel sinks are accented with gold-tone plumbing fixtures that complement the cabinetry hardware and the frames of the arched mirrors.

In the third bathroom, Nguyen included a bright color on the vanity, which is painted a brilliant, saturated teal blue and is topped with marble that features an ogee edge and ornate backsplash. Set within a niche framed with warm wood and accented with gold-colored wallpaper, it evokes an old English vibe.

“The vanity area is a really special moment for this bathroom,” she reports, noting that its ability to shine is granted by the calm, neutral palette of the rest of the room, including the tiled shower that features multiple showerheads, a heated towel rack and a view.



Photos: Reagan Taylor Photography

These clients wanted a spa escape/retreat bathroom that made them feel like they were in the middle of nature, so Jacqueline Norrise included materials reminiscent of the outdoors, such as a wood vanity, a porcelain vanity top that resembles natural stone and moss-colored handmade clay tiles in the shower. Thoughtful organization and storage within the vanity minimize clutter, and a freestanding tub adds to the spa-like vibe.

### ACHIEVING THE FEELING OF A SPA

As Jacqueline Norrise reflects on the term ‘spa style’ as it relates to primary bathrooms, she remembers the concept initially being relatively literal, i.e., replicating an actual spa.

“However, now we’re seeing spaces become more personalized, with a *feeling* of being a spa rather than actually *looking* like a spa,” says the founder of ADL Interiors in Berkeley, CA.

Achieving that feeling is often accomplished by incorporating natural materials, particularly natural stone and wood, and including thoughtful lighting.

“We’ve seen a lot of technological advances in both of these areas that make them easier to use,” she explains. “For example, different kinds of stones and stone mosaics make natural stone more accessible. I especially like to use marble and travertine, combined with a wood vanity. And with advancements in LEDs, we are able to create a spa-like mood by dimming the lights and customizing their color temperature to make the light warmer, all of which can be made at your fingertips with an app. Lighting is also important in terms of natural lighting, so make sure window treatments aren’t too heavy or dark, and make sure they don’t block too much of the window.”

As well, Norrise looks for ways to ‘soften’ the room to create a spa-like escape.

“There are so many hard surfaces in a bathroom,” she states, “so I like to layer and accessorize with ‘soft’ features, such as towels and bath mats to create a warm, relaxing and calming environment. Personally, I like to swap out my towels every year, which admittedly is more than you need, but it makes my bathroom feel more like a hotel, and it doesn’t cost much to really make a difference.”

Spa escapes and spa-like environments are appealing given the hectic pace of many people’s lifestyles, the designer indicates.

“When people are home, they want an escape on a regular basis,” she remarks. “Life is really stressful for a lot of people, so they want to be able to seclude themselves, even beyond their morning and evening routines. They want to spend longer periods of time in their primary bathrooms to really relish in self-care. I know for me, as a parent, sometimes the bathroom is the only place where I can be alone, so enjoying my time in there can be very impactful.”

The designer recently renovated a primary bathroom for some clients who also live a hectic lifestyle.

“They were looking for an escape and a retreat, something that felt like they were in the middle of nature,” Norrise recalls.

The spacious room has several large windows that offer



a view of the outdoors. To bring that feeling into the space, the designer selected materials reminiscent of nature. For example, the porcelain vanity top resembles natural stone, and the light-colored double floating wood vanity keeps the space light and bright. Thoughtful organization and storage within the vanity minimize clutter, which if left unchecked, can be a stressor. A freestanding tub, tucked beneath the windows that overlook the mountain view, adds to the spa-like vibe.

Building upon the bones of the existing double shower, Norrise clad the walls with moss-colored handmade clay tiles from Heath Ceramics.

“The color of the tile brought in some of the natural greenery from the outside to warm up the space, without being overwhelming,” she says. “It’s very peaceful and calm.”

Stacking the tile horizontally furthers the natural connection by mimicking the horizon.

“Aligning it horizontally makes it feel more textural, really focusing on the color rather than the form, shape and lines,” she adds. “We wanted it to fade into the background and be very subtle.”

## TAKING IT UP A NOTCH

For Harmony Weihs' clients who want to have a relaxing spa experience, many no longer need to leave the comforts of their home. Instead, they can simply stroll into their own personal spa in their primary bathroom.

"There is no more getting in a car, sitting in traffic and driving home after," says Weihs, the owner/designer of design-HARMONY in Kirkland, WA. "Many of my clients are working professionals with children. They lead very full lives, so when they are home, they want their primary suite, including the bathroom, to be a place of relaxation."

To create such an environment, the designer addresses multiple physical and visual senses that not only meet the needs of her clients, but also complement the architecture of the home. Often that means incorporating elements such as radiant heat floors, which she considers a 'must-have'. Dimmable LED lighting can set the mood, and soothing music is a plus, so Weihs likes to include low-voltage speakers. Calming colors, especially cooler blues, greens and grays, are intermixed with natural elements such as wood, marble and even marble-look porcelain to keep the space from feeling too cold.

As well, curbless showers with linear drains and dual showerheads convey a high-end spa vibe, as do body sprays and jets, steam and aromatherapy. Upping the ante even more are customized voice- and temperature-controlled shower valves, unique to each client, which were included in one recent bathroom Weihs designed in collaboration with Remont Construction.

Additional spa bath features of this primary bathroom include soothing colors – from the cabinetry, walls and marble vanity top and floor, the latter of which features radiant heat – juxtaposed with striking bold contrast in the shower trim and freestanding tub that add elegance and sophistication. A teak shower bench and living plants warm up the space while a skylight and multiple windows, complete with motorized custom shades, allow natural light to flow into the space. LED lights under the vanity and lighted mirrors add to the ambiance.

"Creating a spa-style bathroom is often about taking it up a notch as far as function and features," she remarks. "However, even some simple things like including easy-to-care-for plants can bring in nature and add color, texture and interest. Another personal favorite 'spa tip' of mine is to hang a few branches of eucalyptus in the shower."

In another recent renovation, Weihs, who worked with Remont Construction, started the spa transformation by reconfiguring the previous bathroom's layout, which included a massive built-in corner tub and small toilet room and shower, all sited inefficiently within a relatively large room.

"It just wasn't very functional," she relates. "The floor plan and flow within a space really can influence how spa-like a space feels."

For example, Weihs' clients still wanted a tub, so she minimized its footprint by swapping out the old built-in version with a sleek freestanding model. Tucking it beneath a pair of windows gave her clients a view to the outdoors.

"The tub fit into the corner perfectly, while still leaving us plenty of room for a large double sink vanity and curbless shower," she indicates. "A tub under a window is a very welcoming feature in a room."

Other notable elements of the transformation include a heated floor, plenty of storage and a combination of warm and cool tones from the wood vanity and marble tiles, which are accented with a touch of brass.

"If you only have cool elements, the room can feel sterile," she says. "And if you have too many warm elements, it can be hard to achieve a 'spa' feeling, so adding the touch of warm brass is key to the room's success."



Photo: Kara Mercer

↑ In this bathroom renovation completed by Harmony Weihs, who worked with Remont Construction, a reconfigured layout made the space more functional and more spa-like. A freestanding tub located beneath the windows gives her clients a view to the outdoors. Other notable feature include a combination of warm and cool tones from the warm wood vanity and cool marble tiles, which are accented with a touch of brass.



Photos: Miranda Estes



▣ Curbless showers with dual showerheads convey a high-end spa vibe for many of Harmony Weihs' designs. Upping the ante even more, this bathroom, designed in collaboration with Remont Construction, features customized voice- and temperature-controlled shower valves, as well as soothing colors juxtaposed with striking bold contrast in the shower trim and freestanding tub. A teak shower bench and living plants warm up the space.



Photos: Nicole Fenzl



With an added interest in creating holistic, healthy spaces, Tamara Magel often turns to natural materials, such as wood and marble, which are both front and center in this bathroom completed in collaboration with True North Construction. The marble is used as the vanity countertop and backsplash, as a shelf and accent behind the freestanding tub and as the bench and accent in the steam shower, while bleached white oak is used for the floating vanity.

#### FOCUS ON WELLNESS AND SELF-CARE

Wellness and self-care have become more important considerations for Tamara Magel's clients, who have been investing more into their primary bathrooms to help them accomplish those goals while also making these spaces more luxurious, glamorous and spa-like.

"My clients are spending more money in the bathroom...almost to the point of what they spend in the kitchen," says the president/creative director of Tamara Magel Interior Design in Sag Harbor, NY. "Especially after COVID, they are leaning more towards wellness and self-care. They want their bathrooms to be an oasis where they can spend time...more time than just taking a shower."

With an added interest in creating holistic, healthy spaces with fewer toxins, the designer often turns to natural materials, such as wood and marble.

"Bringing in materials from the earth makes us feel connected to nature," she explains. "They create a sense of calm because they are something that our minds recognize, for example an oak vanity versus one made of particle board. Our minds recognize oak as a tree, and that recognition translates into a peaceful environment."

Both marble and wood are front and center in one recent bathroom design where Magel, who collaborated with True North Construction, used bold Fantastico Arni marble as the vanity countertop and backsplash, as a shelf and accent behind the freestanding tub and as the bench and accent in the steam shower. Using bleached white oak as the vanity, combined with handmade zellige tile on the floor and in the shower, brings in a casualness that balances the more formal marble.

"I love mixing casual materials with those that are a bit

'dressier,'" Magel explains. "I often combine the two, especially in a place such as the Hamptons, where people may want to have a more casual experience, yet still feel upgraded."

While materials and finishes are integral in creating a spa-like space, the designer complements them with an array of products to further the feeling. For instance, she often includes heated floors, steam showers, freestanding tubs and luxurious plumbing fixtures, all of which make an appearance in this bathroom.

"We were fortunate to have enough space so the tub could have its own 'moment,'" she explains, adding that its location across from a window offers a view to the beautiful backyard. "I also love that we were able to include the marble shelf, which gives my clients a place to display bath salts and candles."

The brass floor-mounted tub filler matches the plumbing fixtures used throughout the rest of the room, including those at the double vanity and in the shower, which has the added spa amenities of body sprays and a rain head showerhead.

"I would never want to be without beautiful brass fixtures," Magel admits, "especially in a spa-style bathroom where they are like jewelry."

In the steam shower, that jewelry, along with the marble and zellige tile, is visible through the glass shower enclosure that is framed with white metal.

"Metal framed doors are very popular now, especially black doors," she relates. "But with this bathroom, we decided to do white because it allows my clients to readily see the beautiful materials and products that all complement each other. It's a delight to the eye where the zellige tile adds texture so the marble, which provides pattern, doesn't fall flat. Add in the 'jewelry,' and it's a super interesting spa-like space."



Photos: Kyle Wodarczyk

## ADDRESSING THE BODY, MIND, SOUL

Libby Palmieri Schwartz has been in the design industry long enough to remember when jetted tubs were considered the epitome of a luxurious, spa-like bathroom.

“Thirty years ago, when I began designing homes, if you had a jetted tub, you had made it,” says the owner/lead designer of House of L Designs in Cleveland, OH. “But today, we have gone far beyond that to the point where luxury spa baths are more about wellness...for the body, the mind and the soul.”

The designer attributes that evolution to a world where stressors keep increasing...where words like ‘faster,’ ‘harder’ and ‘more’ are commonplace.

“The pace at which most people move and interact is continually getting faster,” she observes. “Our brains are continuously multi-tasking at such a rapid speed that most of us are walking around in a fog, just trying to keep up. The idea of having a zone where you can hit a hard stop button and disconnect from the daily grind is something very appealing to our clients.”

As well, Schwartz has found that the concept of feeling good and increasing longevity has populated social media.

“Although it is a relatively newer concept, it is rooting itself into the thread of everyday conversations and into people’s understanding that living well equals taking care of themselves on multiple platforms,” she reports. “I think even five years ago, the concept of being a healthier person was much different. This integration is slowly starting to seep into how we design primary baths. It is reaching far beyond adding steam or a rain head in a shower to create a sense of tranquility. Now, clients are delving deeper and wanting a more well-rounded experience that complements the lifestyle goals they are pursuing, such as cold plunge, red light and infrared light therapy, rain simulation and dry saunas, which although not new concepts overall, are really just becoming more mainstream. It is our job to not only introduce these options to our clients and educate them on what is available, but also to research on our end about how to create a customized experience.”

For one client, that customized experience included a focus on the shower, which is clad in porcelain tile that resembles natural stone. The porcelain is repeated as the his/her vanity tops, and the colors of its veins are peppered throughout the space.

“They consider water to be a healing force for them,” she relates. “They were actually very specific about their shower and their desire for an all-immersive experience with water. To make



■ Libby Palmieri Schwartz’s clients wanted a customized spa escape experience that included a focus on the shower, so the designer included body sprays on two sides in addition to the showerhead.

it all-encompassing, we included body sprays on two sides in addition to the showerhead.”

Schwartz is also currently working on a bathroom where reconfiguring the floorplan was the key to making the space feel more spa-like, more customized and ultimately more functional.

“The shower was centered across from the vanities, which in a small bathroom such as this one immediately creates congestion,” she explains. “So, I rearranged the space and moved the shower to one end so the vanities had more space around them. The new layout also gave me the ability to increase the size of the shower. That was important because these clients wanted to include steam, which meant I needed a shower that was large enough to include a bench so they can sit down, relax and really enjoy the wellness benefits. In this case, the shower in the initial layout wouldn’t have been comfortable or functional for them to use, so the ability to personalize a bathroom to really target a client’s needs is really what makes the space special.” ■