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Off the Wall

A designer thinks outside the box in this barrier-free bath. It's human nature to put up barriers, whether by establishing personal space or by erecting physical boundaries. But these days, it seems that the older we get, the more we long to be free of constraints. That was certainly the case with this winning bath, which features a unique construction.

"The owner is in her 60s and decided that she no longer wanted to be confined by walls," said Jay Eiring, designer and president of Bathhaus in Barrington, IL. "She wanted a space that was completely devoid of obstructions. In some ways, she sees the bath as a way to reconnect to the uninhibited days of her youth."

The bath is certainly more open than its '80s predecessor, which featured a wall of cabinets that was complemented by a wall of mirrors and fluorescent lights.

"It was a bit of a nightmare," said Eiring. "Everything had its own little, distinct box. There was a separate shower, a separate water closet, separate sinks, the tub was shoved in a corner. It wasn't user-friendly."

The current bath's design, on the other hand, lends an ease of use and air of spaciousness to the once cramped quarters. All that remain of the original bath are the window and the skylight. "We gutted the place and started from scratch," said Eiring. And while he and his team were given great leeway in designing the space, it wasn't as easy as one might think.

"The owner was adamant that there be absolutely no walls," Eiring noted. "We thought, 'Okay, and how exactly are we going to do that?'" The first and biggest challenge was the shower. "Many people have forgone shower doors, but the homeowner wanted to forgo shower walls, too," Eiring said. The result is a shower column that stops just short of the ceiling. Within the column are two showerheads that are devoid of aerators, letting the water "flow in its most natural form." A depressed floor allows for drainage.

Besides the column's corner placement, tiles were used to further define the shower area. "We went from large-format, 12-in. x 12-in. tiles on the wall to mosaics on the floor to really set the space apart," said Eiring. The wall tiles were "stepped" to provide a geometric element to the room's linear lines.

Also distinct is the oval toilet that sits in the open. "That was another tough part to design," said Eiring. "I wasn't initially thrilled with having the toilet out in the open, partly because using a traditional tank style would have ruined the room's aesthetic. The next idea was to put one in the wall, but that wasn't an attractive option either."

In the end, Eiring chose a tankless model with clean, rounded lines that both complement and contrast with the bath's rectangular footprint. "With no walls, every piece that went into this bath really had to fit with the next one, because everything would be out in the open. The 'transitions' had to make sense and look cohesive," he noted.

Eiring replaced the old tub with a new, rectangular air bath, whose shape is echoed in a skylight above and a rectangular vanity directly across the room. The vanity is as simple and clean as the rest of the room. Concrete countertops and chrome faucets add a cool touch to the rich browns and ruddy reds that dominate the space, while almost flat, pure-white sinks lend a pop of brightness.



Wenge, wall-hung cabinets and drawers underneath provide storage, as do the mirrors, which double as medicine cabinets.

"To keep the vanity area as unfussy as the rest of the bath, we chose very sleek medicine cabinets that are offset with light. But the unique thing about them is that the doors slide open rather than opening out into the space," said Eiring.

It's details like these that make the bath not only unique, but also truly easy to use, noted Eiring. For instance, both the tub and shower can be accessed from either side, and both have seating areas. "We didn't design the space with Universal Design in mind, but it certainly has some of those elements," he said. "The open layout will be ideal for years to come."

And that's just what the owner wanted—a unique, modern bath that would stand the test of time.



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