



The smallest room in the house

The bathroom is usually the smallest room in the house. Donna White shares her interior design tips for turning it into a fun and functional space. By Donna White.

Some of us live in big houses, but most of us don't. Importantly, all bathrooms regardless of size should be functional. The activities that take place in them have to be supported by fixtures, fittings, electricity and plumbing. It is necessary to have sufficient space to support all the equipment and systems, and to be able to move around easily.

Larger bathrooms allow the introduction of fittings and fixtures that are worthy of scrutiny. In particular, the bath. Sculptural pieces from roll-top, and claw-foot period pieces to contemporary oval or round bath tubs, can take centre stage. Vessel-like bowls or troughs are also more appealing than standard sinks in a space that has room to breathe.

The greater floor area also means that larger bathrooms can be furnished with additional pieces of freestanding furniture. Armoires and chests can double up as storage for linen; the odd chair, chaise longue, or bench can be included.

Designing a small bathroom, however, can present a design challenge. With careful planning you do not have to compromise on function or looks. What you may have to sacrifice, however, is any fitting or fixture that is not strictly necessary. For example, you may have to forego a separate shower and bath, for a shower over the bath.

If you have travelled, you may have noticed that European hotel bathrooms are much smaller than our standard home bathroom. However, small does not mean that you have to sacrifice quality. Whilst the hotel bathroom may be very small, there are often lovely showerheads that give a great shower, and a feeling of luxury.

The Europeans also maximise the feeling of space by hanging toilets, vanities and storage towers off the walls. This creates space below, and gives the appearance of more room. I take this one step further when I design bathrooms, by specifying strip lighting, on a sensor, under wall-hung vanities. This is ambient light that not only enhances the feeling of space, but has a safety element too.

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Task lighting is essential for shaving and applying makeup, and should be angled and positioned around a mirror so that the face is evenly illuminated. Small recessed down lights placed around the perimeter of a small bathroom will increase the sense of space. Reflective surfaces such as glossy wall and floor tiles, glass, metal and mirror reflect light, and promote the illusion of spaciousness.

A bathroom mirror does not necessarily have to be a sheet of mirror specifically designed for bathrooms. Add your own style and personality by sourcing antique or retro-style mirrors from second-hand shops. Alternatively, choose a lovely frame from a picture framer, and have it fitted with a bevelled mirror.

When designing a bathroom, large or small, I always try to convince my clients to tile (or paint) whole walls, from floor to ceiling rather than introduce uncomfortable visual breaks. A visual break on a wall can be the transition of paint to tile, for example.

In a large bathroom the visual break of wall tile to paint defeats the whole purpose, or advantage of having a large space. In a small bathroom there is no point, because the visual break is unnecessarily fussy.

The decorative scheme in a small bathroom should be simple and coordinated. If a client cannot afford to tile all the walls from floor to ceiling, I would rather they tiled one wall from top to bottom, and applied paint to cover the entire remaining walls.

Large tiles can be more space enhancing than a busy grid of smaller tiles. When you lay the same tile on the floor and wall, the effect is elegant, and further opens the room visually.

Storage in a small bathroom can be introduced with space enhancing wall hung storage towers. However, if you integrate pipes, the toilet cistern, the undersides of sinks, and the bath within a built-in framework, you will not only have coherence; you can exploit the space between the fixtures for storage. In a small bathroom, the effect will increase the sense of space, though there will be some sacrifice of floor area.

Clutter is distracting and undermines the sense of space. The smaller the space, the more ruthless you need to be about what possessions you keep within it. Unless you have plenty of room, it is not necessary to store bulk supplies of toilet paper in the bathroom. The same goes for bath linen. My advice is to not keep anything in the bathroom that is not in daily use, or directly relevant to what takes place there. ■