

The Master Bathroom Is the New Master Bedroom

Luxury bathroom upgrades grow more expensive and more lavish

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Master bathroom at Ritz Carlton Residences Miami Beach
COURTESY LIONHEART CAPITAL

For Rob and Elizabeth Yingling of Fairfax, Va., the 10 years it took for their master bathroom to become a showpiece in their home was worth it.

Last year, the couple took a sledgehammer to their master bathroom's 1950s-era hot pink fixtures and walls that seemed fit for Barbara Eden in "I Dream of Jeannie." For their split-level rancher outside of Washington, D.C., which they bought in 2004, they instead opted for sleek aqua green subway tile, recessed lighting, minimalistic underlit custom cabinetry and underfloor heating. The frosted glass swinging shower door was junked and clear heavy glass sliding panels were added.

It wasn't cheap: \$35,000 to be exact.

“We lived with that pink bathroom for 10 years,” said Elizabeth Yingling, 48, senior director of marketing and compliance for Reston, Va.-based Sallie Mae Bank. “I called it my little pink prison shower,” she said. But she’s glad she spent every penny. “We have a pretty modest home, but now we wake up with a bathroom exactly the way we wanted it,” she said. The Yinglings aren’t alone.

As much as \$350 billion in 2016 will be poured into home remodelings, additions and improvements, according to the American Institute of Architects 2016 spending projections released late last year, up from \$ 325 billion in 2015 , and more U.S. homeowners are opting for luxury bathrooms over other rooms in the house, even kitchens.

“The master bathroom is becoming a real point of focus, and since it’s one of the most used rooms in the house, it’s an opportunity to make a statement,” said Beth Fisher, senior management director of marketing for the Corcoran Sunshine Marketing Group, a real-estate sales and marketing firm and developer in New York.

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Most homeowners in 2016 will spend between \$5,600 and \$13,000 on bathroom remodeling, according to HomeAdvisor.com. Some, like the Yinglings, will spend even more, partially because of the cost of construction and labor in the D.C. area, and to enhance the resale value. “We didn’t think it would look luxurious if we bought off the shelf and rushed it,” said Rob Yingling, 47, a communications manager for the Washington D.C. region’s two airports. “We had the luxury of time and went slowly,” he said.

With now near-record low interest rates that encourage mortgage refinancing (the lowest since the record low set in November of 2012), many homeowners are going bigger on renovations and remodeling than ever before, according to the AIA’s Home Design Trends fourth quarter 2015 design survey of 500 architectural firms. 29% of AIA’s respondents said their clients want bigger bathrooms, up from 25% a year ago.

“What we’re seeing now is master bathrooms and master bedrooms being almost the same size,” said Allison Greenfield, partner at Lionheart Capital in Miami which is developing The Ritz Carlton Residences Miami Beach. Greenfield said a 600-square-foot bathroom isn’t out of the ordinary anymore for luxury developments like hers, which feature floor-to-ceiling stone, recessed LED lighting, hidden vanities and enclosed-glass rain showers. “It’s not really a shower, it’s like a wet room,” she said. “You are in your own world of water.”

The most popular upgrade is the aforementioned LED lighting (85% of AIA respondents indicated a client’s project included the feature) followed by stall showers without tubs (65%) and doorless showers (64%). Upscale shower fixtures with multiple heads and radiant floors also grew in popularity in the last quarter of 2015, compared with a year before, the AIA said. “It used to be that you couldn’t sell an apartment in New York without a soaking tub, but now getting rid of those tubs and adding bigger showers is the trend,” said Thomas Juul-Hansen, the interior architect of One57 along Manhattan’s so-called “Billionaire’s Row” as well as Three Hundred Collins in South Beach.

Still, don't expect a luxury bathroom redo to add significantly to your bottom line at resale. According to Remodeling Magazine, upscale bathroom remodeling recouped only about 56% of its costs at sale time, and only a handful of markets could turn a profit with a bathroom makeover, compared with upgrading home insulation or enhancing curb appeal with stone veneer or steel entry doors, which recouped 90% of their costs or more at resale, and in some markets, even made a profit. Moreover, costs for such a major project like a luxury bathroom overhaul have risen too in 2016, up 6% nationwide, according to Remodeling Magazine.

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The Yingling's bathroom remodeling effort was no different. "Every contractor we had in for a quote started at \$30,000, and that's just the base number to get started even before asking us what type of fixtures and tile we wanted," Elizabeth Yingling said. "We did a lot of the legwork ourselves to save a ton of money," she said.

Nevertheless, as many a parent can attest, home buyers want a bathroom not just to do their daily business, but as a showcase or a sanctuary to shut off from a 24/7 social media and smartphone dominated world. "There is something very calming about not being reachable" said Fraser Patterson, a former general contractor, who now runs Bolster, a Manhattan-based company that matches clients with architects and contractors. "In a 21st century home filled with technology, the bathroom is still almost 19th century," he said.

Shlomi Reuveni, managing director of Town New Development in New York City, a real estate sales and marketing firm. Reuveni says his buyers often want luxurious yet uncomplicated designs, such as double or even triple walk-in showers, uninterrupted stone walls and minimalistic fixtures and hidden cabinets. "In our designs we always create a very spa-like space," Reuveni said. "Your bathroom is your private sanctuary. It's for you and you only to enjoy," he said.

That's just what Elizabeth Yingling had in mind with her bathroom upgrade. "I can't wait to get into my shower now. It's a little piece of heaven."