

A CHECKLIST FOR BATHROOM & POWDER ROOM LIGHTING



Bathrooms (and kitchens) should be the first areas considered in remodel projects. Homeowners can add 80-90% of their investment of a bath or kitchen remodel onto the value of their home. These days that is a very good return. Getting the lighting right will make them dramatic, functional and relaxing.

Well-designed lighting is of the utmost importance in the bathroom. Yet, more often than not, people use inadequate lighting techniques for much-needed task illumination. How many times have we seen a dramatic photograph of a vanity with a recessed downlight directly over the sink? It makes for a great shot, but imagine yourself standing at the mirror with that harsh light hitting the top of your head. Remember when, as a child, you would hold a flashlight under your chin to create a scary face? The same thing happens, only in reverse. Long dark shadows appear under your eyes, nose and chin. This is extremely bad lighting for applying make-up or shaving.

Another typical arrangement is the use of one light fixture that is surface-mounted above the mirror. This is only slightly better than the one recessed light over the mirror. At best, it illuminates the top half of the face, letting the bottom half fall into shadow. This is an especially hard light by which to shave. There are just so many ways you can tilt your head to catch the light.

Task Lighting at the Sink

For the best task lighting use two fixtures that flank the mirror above the sink to provide the necessary *cross illumination*. The most effective way to provide this cross illumination is to

wall-mount a pair of translucent fixtures at eye-level on either side of the sink. These task lights can flank a hanging mirror or be mounted directly on a full wall mirror. For inset sink areas, the mirror lights can be mounted on the return walls.

I recommend 75 watts worth of light per fixture in the master bath and 40 watts worth of light per fixture in the powder room. LEDs can give you the same amount of light for much less wattage. Plus in California Title 24 requires that the lighting needs to be 100% high efficacy or controlled by a switched motion sensor.

Lighting for Tubs and Showers

While the task area at the vanity is the most critical to illuminate correctly, other areas of the bath also bear consideration. Tubs and showers need a good general light. For this purpose, recessed fixtures with white opal diffusers are commonly used and relatively effective. One drawback is that many of the units on the marketplace project approximately two inches below the ceiling line and may not be visually comfortable. There is a recent development that makes lighting in these wet locations a little more exciting. There are fixture manufacturers that offer recessed adjustable LED versions that are rated for wet environments. As designers are specifying wonderful tile, interesting plumbing fixtures and niches for art, they can now install directional fixtures to highlight these exciting elements.

Make sure that all light fixtures, whether recessed or surface mounted, that are to be used in the shower, steam room, and over the tub are listed for wet locations by UL, ETL or another approved testing laboratory. If Underwriters Laboratories test them, they will have a blue UL label that indicates they are wet location rated.

LEDs in the Bathroom

LED (light emitting diodes) options are important today. Higher energy costs make the use of high efficacy light sources, in the construction or remodeling of bathrooms, a strong consideration. LEDs are at least three times more energy efficient than incandescent lamps. They also last longer and produce less heat.

Educating yourself about LED sources will be the most important part of the learning process. Fortunately, the color of many of today's LEDs are very flattering to skin tones. Many manufacturers are also jumping on the GU-24 bandwagon. This is an LED A-lamp (household bulb) with a bayonet base that can be dimmed with a standard incandescent dimmer.

This GU-24 base meets California's Title 24 requirements because the bayonet base cannot be replaced by a screw-in incandescent lamp.

These LED lamps not only provide greatly improved color rendering, but the 10-watt version produces an amount of illumination close to a 60-watt incandescent bulb. Colors available in the LEDs are close to that of standard incandescent (2700 degrees Kelvin) or halogen (3000 degrees Kelvin). Mixed light sources can be used in one's bath without creating disconcerting color variations. My new favorites are the LEDs that are the color of dimmed incandescent (2400 and 2200 degrees Kelvin). Having a CRI (color Rendering Index) of 90 or higher insures you will get a quality of light that is incandescent in feel.

Exhaust Fans

Windowless interior bathrooms will require an exhaust fan. Bathrooms with an operable window are not required by code to have an exhaust fan, although many homeowners like to have fans to help remove steam and odors. Specifying a combination fan and light is a quick fix, but not an attractive choice. Make sure to specify separate switching for the fan and light, if allowed by code, so that the fan doesn't automatically go on when someone runs into the bath to grab a tissue or wash their hands.

Ambient Lighting

Indirect lighting in a bathroom adds a warm overall glow to the space. Wall sconces or cove lighting that directs light upward can provide gentle ambient illumination. Both of these can use LEDs. For bathrooms with higher ceilings, pendant-hung fixtures with incandescent or LED lamping can also be considered as a source of fill light. Another good reason for adding some type of ambient illumination in bathrooms is that they are now becoming multi-functional areas. Homeowners can have exercise areas, dressing rooms, lounging areas, and whirlpools for more than one. Some bathrooms have even become intimate entertaining areas that deserve all the design care that you give to the other main areas in the house.

Skylights

Often skylights are installed to supplement or replace electric lighting during the daytime hours. Clear glass or acrylic skylights project a hard beam of light, shaped like the skylight opening, onto the floor of the bath. Bronze-colored skylights cast a dimmer version of the same shape, while a white opal acrylic skylight diffuses and softens the natural light, producing a more gentle light that fills the bath more completely.

Accent Lighting

Along with this newly understood need for ambient illumination an opportunity for accent lighting opens up as part of the mix. Plants and art pieces can be highlighted like they are in other areas of the house.

When people are entertaining, the room most frequently visited by their guests will likely be the powder room. This space can be treated differently from the other bathrooms. No serious tasks are going to be performed by guests. This is simply a place where people will wash their hands or check their hair and make-up before rejoining the soiree.

Here, lights should just provide a flattering glow. Sometimes a pair of translucent fixtures on either side of the mirror with a single fixture in the middle of the ceiling will do the trick. Some powder rooms do double duty as guest baths for overnight houseguests. If this is the case light the bath as you would a master bath, also making sure to put the various lights on dimmers to allow for flexible control over the illumination levels.

The Bottom Line

Bathrooms, along with kitchens, are the two areas where people are most willing to invest their money, because a well-done remodel in these two rooms adds immediate value to the home. They can normally recoup most of the money they have invested when the home goes on the market. But the most important thing to remember is that good illumination for tasks in the bathroom is primary, because *looking good is hard*.

