

The 13 Most Common Mistakes In Bathroom Remodeling

By Jim McCoy, President – BathExpress

Whether you're doing it on your own or hiring a pro, here are some potential pitfalls to avoid.

Mistake # 1 - Using a "Jack Of All Trades" Contractor

It may not seem like it, but bathroom remodeling is a unique specialty in the world of construction. A typical bathroom remodel has more than fifty primary components that must be matched and installed properly. The subfloor, backer boards and other "non-visible" components MUST be installed properly to avoid annoying problems for years to come. Using a tradesman who builds decks, frames houses, installs windows and fixes porches may not result in the finished product you're really hoping for.

On the other hand, there are several companies who do nothing but build bathrooms. Their installers typically understand the plethora of surprises and challenges that each bathroom can present. And like any specialist, they are usually better prepared to diagnose and solve the problem quickly and without undue expense.

Mistake # 2 - Buying mismatched hardware and fixtures

Some of you won't care that much about this one. BUT the folks looking to buy your house one day will. So here it is. If you choose a faucet that is finished in brushed nickel, make sure that your other components are also in brushed nickel. These other components include your towel bar (for bath towels), your towel ring (for hand towels), your toilet paper holder, your shower head, your shower trim kit (the area that has your on/off handle and temperature adjustment, your tub spout, your shower door and even the knobs on your cabinetry).

Be careful, one manufactures brushed nickel or oil-rubbed bronze may not look at all like another company's equivalent. When they don't match, it just doesn't look nice. If possible, buy your fixtures at the same place so you can compare finishes before it's too late.

Mistake # 3 - Not Matching finishes on the sink, toilet and tub/shower

How many bathrooms have I seen that have a white sink, biscuit colored toilet and almond bathtub. They just don't feel right. Some are downright ugly. And these are NEW bathrooms that some poor homeowner just shelled out the big bucks for. That's a shame.

The toilet, tub and sink should match. If you're using white, use white on all three. Moreover, you'll need to watch out for variations WITHIN a color. For example, Kohler's biscuit colored Hourglass bathtub is slightly different in color than a biscuit colored American Standard toilet. Compare samples of the materials BEFORE you buy. Or run the risk of being annoyed every morning minutes after you've just awakened.

Mistake # 4 - Buying on price only

Who doesn't want the best deal that they can find? The problem is this - in bathroom remodeling, price can be dramatically lowered by using the cheapest materials and even omitting critical components. But better materials work better, last longer and give a homeowner a much better chance of avoiding disasters. (Think flooding and electrical issues.)

In particular, I would NEVER cut corners on the following items:

+ **Underlayment** – this is the stuff that goes *over* your subfloor and *under* your tile. It keeps moisture from going down through the floor or coming from below. It's important. And some remodelers skip it all together. We're partial to a German product called Schluter-DITRA. It goes in quickly (saving you labor expense) and is completely waterproof. Make sure your installer lays a bed of thin-set cement below and above this product before tile goes down.

+ **Diverter valve** – Ahhhhh. The feeling of a nice warm shower. BUT, the temperature needs to be right and should adjust very little when hot or cold water is used elsewhere in the house. The diverter valve is installed in your shower and controls the flow and temperature of shower and bath water. A cheap one may do a poor job of maintaining the proper temperature. Worse yet, it may leak behind your wall. Unless you have access to the valve from another area, you may need to rip out the tile and wall to fix a malfunctioning valve. Matching and replacing tile and grout after the fix-up may also be a real headache.

+ **Toilet** – Today's low-flow toilets – at 1.6 gallon per flush – save a lot of water. But many flush poorly and are hard to maintain. A quick Google search reveals any number of toilet studies (believe it or not) that compare a variety of factors including flushing power, noise and price. The bottom line? There are several reasonably priced toilets that do an outstanding job at flushing, have a smoother finish to stay cleaner and look great. Do your homework. A bad toilet can be a nightmare.

Mistake # 5 - Installing Shower Tile All the Way to the Ceiling

Now don't get me wrong, I know that installing tile all the way up to the ceiling CAN look good at times. I've even tiled one of my own bathrooms to the ceiling. BUT,

more often than not it leads to annoying and difficult to remedy problems. You see, most ceiling lines (the corner line where the wall meets the ceiling) are not straight and level. However, most shower wall tile is straight. So the space between the top of the tile and the ceiling is wider in some spots and narrow in others. Once the tile is set and grout is installed, that thick/thin grout line can become quite noticeable to the eye. Worse yet, it can be very difficult to maintain. Where the line is wider, the grout will often be concave creating a little “mold shelf” for years to come.

The better alternative – in most cases – is to set tile to a height of seven feet or so and use a finish or “bull nose” tile to create a neat, easy to maintain line. The remaining wall space can then be primed and painted and along with the rest of the bathroom. It should look better and be easier to maintain.

Mistake # 6- Using poor underlayment (floor) and backer boards (shower surround)

Watch out for the contractor who chooses to install green board (water resistant gypsum board) behind your shower tile. Over time, it doesn't hold up well to moisture and is a poor foundation for heavier tile. For years, cement backer boards have been the gold standard. However, newer backer boards are not porous (cement boards are) and many are completely impervious to water.

On floors, cement board continues to be a good alternative, but we prefer Schluter-DITRA as it is completely waterproof. In conjunction with two layer of thin-set cement, Schluter-DITRA can help the installer to “level” the floor before tile is installed helping to eliminate cracked tile and crumbled grout.

Mistake # 7 - Using inexpensive sealant (or no sealant at all!)

If you have ceramic, porcelain or natural stone tile installed, the grout lines (and the natural stone itself) must be sealed. Unsealed grout quickly becomes dirty and becomes a wonderful breeding ground for mold.

DO NOT cut corners on sealants. While a gallon jug of sealant can be picked up at the home improvement store for \$20.00, I would skip it and drive straight to a tile store. Tile stores have access to the higher quality sealants that are guaranteed for twenty years or more. These newer sealants are pretty amazing. They are made to penetrate and fill the porous grout so that moisture cannot even enter that space. The better sealants often come in aerosol cans and can be applied better (including into the corners) than a liquid sealant and sponge can. Be warned, the best sealants smell pretty bad for a day or two, but they're worth it.

Mistake # 8 - Using caulk in areas that need silicone

Cheap caulk should be illegal. It starts as soon as it's applied. And replacing can take up to a day of your precious time or a day of expensive labor time. All this can be

avoided by using the highest quality caulk available (it doesn't cost that much more) and using silicone where appropriate (for under mount sinks, backsplashes, shower door installations, etc.)

Mistake # 9 - Buying substandard hardware

Cheap faucets look cheap and eventually leak. The finish can start to wear off within months and many need constant adjustment to stay tight. Be sure that your new faucets (and shower components) have ceramic disk valves (not rubber or plastic washers) and that the finish is of the highest quality. One quick tip here, oil-rubber bronze finishes can be beautiful. But they are hard to apply and often chip, wear off or simply change in color over time. Buy the highest quality you can afford if using bronze hardware.

Mistake # 10 - Not replacing shut-off valves

Good shut-off valves (for hot and cold water under the vanity or for the toilet) are only a few dollars. Over the past forty years, homebuilders have typically used valves that have a rubber washer inside. The washer eventually deteriorates and the water either won't shut off – or worse yet – it leaks. Why in the world would anyone leave these on when you're remodeling the bathroom anyway? Be sure to install high quality new shut off valves for the hot water supply, the cold water supply and toilet. If you're lucky enough to have an access panel for the shower/tub water supply, install them here as well.

Mistake # 11 - Not using a licensed plumber

Oh man, I've seen this one over and over. The contractor with a clipboard quoting a price to do the "entire project." This same individual will do it all...including the plumbing.

Plumbing is a specialty. Good plumbers can ensure that you avoid the most costly problems imaginable (Think flooding, tearing out shower tile to fix bad plumbing behind the walls, leaks that can never quite be located, but drip for years to come.

So... how much did you save by letting the non-plumber do the plumbing? Very little – if any. Contractor hourly rates and plumber hourly rates are not that different. Insist on a licensed plumber.

Mistake # 12 - Ignoring the Design Process

We've all heard of the "three bid" approach. Call or visit three contractors or home centers, get three bids and pick the "best." Often, the contractor will quote a price for labor and rough materials and then recommend that you go out and buy your own materials. 'Sounds good, right?

Maybe. If you have a lot of time on your hands (months) and a flair for design, then this may be a fun project. For most.... It's not. If you're not really "into" this sort of thing, it can become a show-stopping nightmare. Many people think that a bathroom has three or four components (cabinet, toilet, tub...), but that's not at all true. The typical bathroom has more than *fifty* components (see list below) that need to be researched, matched, ordered, sized and brought to the home. It's awfully hard to know which component to start with. The cabinetry? Maybe. How about the flooring? Everything should match that, right.

That's why a high percentage of bathroom remodels start with a bathroom designer. These professionals can make recommendations, assemble sample materials, advise as to the pro's and con's of different brands and systems and help you make sound budget decisions.

But...does a designer add to the cost? Maybe, but many designers and design firms have access to lower prices for materials that can offset the cost of their time and expertise. Even if your new bathroom does cost a little more, it's far better than being stuck with a poorly designed bath with cheap and/or unmatched materials.

Mistake # 13 - Over-paying for your new bathroom

Bathroom remodeling can be very expensive. There are a number of expensive trades involved (carpentry, plumbing, electrical, tile setting) and a lot of expensive materials packed into a small space. So, how can you make sure you're not paying too much?

First and foremost, find a company or contractor that has an efficient process resulting in fewer days on site. For the most part, labor is the most expensive component. Ask your remodeler how long your project would take relative to the industry average. Also, be careful about working with a firm that uses the same custom carpenters for high-end kitchens with multi-piece crown trim (these guys aren't cheap) and bathroom remodeling. A bathroom remodeling specialist can often do a better job at a lower price.

*For more information, contact BathExpress at Info@BathExpress.com or 1-877-698-BATH (2284)
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