

## Bathrooms Are Getting Personalized Touch With Luxury Amenities, Modernized Products

### *New Designs Take Toilets And Showers Into Jet Age*

BY STEPHEN DRAVIS

Bathrooms have entered the jet age.

From tubs with whirlpool action to showers featuring streams of water coming at users from every direction, there are few limits to the choices available for bathroom designers.

And customers are availing themselves of those options.

"I think the demand has always been there to remodel the bath," said Donna Shea, branch manager of Capitol District Supply's Saratoga Springs store. "I think we're seeing more luxury products being ordered. People are not just replacing their existing bathrooms but upgrading.

"They're looking to make it more special, to make it their own. It's their own personal retreat."

The leading manufacturer of bath products, Kohler Co. of Wisconsin, offers a wide variety of ways to personalize that retreat. Shea's Capitol District Supply and Malta's Aird Dorrance are authorized Kohler dealers.

The former recently underwent a major renovation of its 2,500-square-foot showroom. The latter opened in May as the second branch location of Plattsburgh-based Aird Dorrance and boasts of being the largest Kohler dealer in the area with 6,000 square feet of floor space, mostly devoted to bathroom wares but also including kitchen fixtures.

Both offer more than Kohler, but the Wisconsin firm is the industry leader, according to Aird Dorrance's Evans.

"Kohler is twice the size of everyone else on the market," he said. "They do a lot of unique things."

A trip around either showroom floor gives an idea of the choices that are available.

Evans joked that the body sprays generated by one of his store's floor models looks like "Hoffman's Car Wash," and he is not far from the truth.

In one model, three jets pump out water from the wall of the shower while a swiveling arm with rotating nozzles swings up and down to adjust to any height from the waist up. In another design, gallons of

water come crashing down at 80 gallons per minute from above in a waterfall effect. Other showers have oversized overhead nozzles measuring nearly a foot in diameter.

Today's showers are about more than washing up; they're about "hydro-massage" "BodySpa jets," the Kohler catalog explains, "are strategically placed on either side of the spine at key massage accupressure points."

Users can stand up or sit down in the showers, some of which come with built-in seats. While some people may not equate showers with relaxation, the upright hydro-massage experience blends well with busy lifestyles, Shea explained.

"I think it's fair to say to the industry is trending more toward the high end showers," she said. "Today a customer may forego a whirlpool tub and put in a multiple head shower instead. Bathing choices have changed. Everyone is showering today. It's a luxury to fill a tub and take a long soak."

Those who choose to soak rather than stand will find that tubs have come a long way, as well.

Today's high-end bath tubs feature whirlpools that can create different kinds of bubbles depending on ones preference. One trendy style features an effervescent effect that Evans likens to "a glass of Saratoga Vichy water."

Some baths come with interior lighting that changes during the bath, a feature Kohler calls "chromatherapy." And motors up to 2 horsepower in strength power the water that pulsates from jets designed to hit key pressure points on the body. How many jets? That depends on model and the customer's checkbook.

Redoing a bathroom with all the latest designs can get pricey. One of Kohler's divisions, Kallista, offers a claw-footed tub that retails for more than \$11,000. But baths and showers are not the only areas of the bathroom where new designs and new technology can be expensive.

The first thing one sees when entering Aird Dorrance's showroom is Kohler's new Purist Hatbox Comfort Height Toilet. But visitors can be forgiven if they don't know what they're looking at.

The Hatbox is shaped like its



Bob Walsh, branch manager of the Aird Dorrance facility in Malta, displays a bubble massage unit, one of the many options homeowners like in today's modern bathrooms.

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namesake and virtually unrecognizable as a toilet. The product's minimalist design is essentially an oblong cylinder that rises from the floor looking more like a clothes hamper than a toilet.

The Hatbox, which retails for about \$2,500, does not have a tank on the back. Its compressor is underneath the bowl for what Evans described as a European design.

"Over the past couple decades we've witnessed the television's transformation from bulky boxes to slim, streamlined plasma screens and appliances change from typical white to commercial-inspired stainless steel and even retro colors," Kohler Kitchen and Bath Group President David Kohler said in a news release. "Why should the appearance and design of the toilet remain the same as it has been for the last century? The Purist Hatbox toilet is simply a natural evolution of how we perceive the toilet."

"Designers and high-end people are buying them," she said. "I don't know if it's the novelty of it or what. But when it's closed, it doesn't look like a toilet. It's also easier to clean the outside."

Ease of cleaning has driven other innovations in toilet design.

Without going as radical as the Hatbox, homeowners can purchase toilets with "hidden traps," smooth sides in the back instead of the conventional curved porcelain surface that mirrors the pipes and requires intricate scrubbing. Another trouble spot for cleaning, the seat hinges, is made easier with a removable toilet seat like Kohler's Cachet model.

And while some designers are focusing on the comfort of toilet

cleaners, others are worried about the comfort of toilet users. That is why 3-foot high "comfort height" toilets are increasingly the toilet of choice in remodeled bathrooms.

"The comfort height seats are more available in the last few years," Shea said. "We're getting a lot of calls for them. They're going to be the new standard. It has to do with more than just the aging of the public and bad hips, knees and backs, but also with the fact that the population is generally taller. People have longer legs today than they did years ago."

While the styles for showers, tubs and toilets continue to change for form and function, one area of bathroom design remains fairly constant

"White and biscuit are still the rage," Evans said about color. "Kohler's trying to introduce new 'fashion' colors, and people will look at them, but usually they'll go back to white or biscuit."

Biscuit, which is akin to an older hue called almond, and white are neutral colors, Evans and Shea both pointed out.

People can install expensive permanent fixtures in neutral tones and then accessorize around them with more specific color schemes. Sometimes those choices are being made by professional interior designers, but today's bathroom market is easy to use for homeowners who want to make their own selections.

"Kohler is into the whole 'suite' concept in bathrooms," Evans said. "You can buy everything from soup to nuts — fixtures, fittings, the paper dispenser, everything — in the same style." □