

# Luxury Water Spas

Designers showcase how to take water to the next level, transforming this integral part of the bath into something extraordinary.

BY KIM BERNDTSON

When it comes to selecting finishes and features in master bathrooms, people are still looking for those that replicate a visit to a luxurious and well-appointed spa.

“My clients are taking this former utility space and turning it into a spa experience,” says Krista Buchholz, designer, Borchert Kitchen & Bath, in Washington, MI. “They want to relax and unwind in their master bath, and they are looking for upgrades that can help them enjoy their time spent in the bathroom, rather than just getting in and out.”

Steve Besch, president, Besch Design, in Chicago, IL, reports that many of his clients are trying to make their homes more spa-like by including features they have experienced during travels and other outings. “People are exposed to so many cool features they see in hotels and spas as well as in showrooms,” he says. “They see everything that could be, and they want something similar. They want that personal luxury in their own master bath.”

Lori Toups-Fenton, owner/principal designer, Sweetlake Interior Design, in Houston, TX, agrees. “My clients don’t want to have to go to a spa,” she says. “They want to stay in their own home and enjoy the luxuries of a spa experience in their own bathroom.”

But whatever spa features homeowners desire, designers agree that it all comes down to the water experience.

## SHOWCASING THE SHOWER

Water touches nearly everything in the bath, including showers and tubs, and even toilets and sink/tub faucets. So it’s no surprise that when creating a luxury environment, water is top of mind.

Showers are typically the first place people look to include indulgent water features, with the most frequent choices being specialty/multiple showerheads, body sprays and steam. In some markets, clients are even taking the indoor shower outdoors, albeit in a simpler form.

Besch notes the popularity of hand-held and rain showerheads in particular. “I don’t do much anymore without including a handheld,” he says, noting clients appreciate that it can also simplify cleaning, especially in larger showers.

The Illinois designer often combines them with a rainhead. “They aren’t typically the most powerful, but they offer a great feel,” he says, adding that some clients enjoy rain panels that can be mounted flush with the ceiling and adjusted to direct water flow. Including a thermostatic valve maintains multiple showerheads at a preset temperature so no adjustments are needed, and no extra time is needed to wait for one to warm up.

For Buchholz, dual showerheads have become the norm as well. “Whether it’s a rainhead and handheld, or a fixed head and handheld, people definitely want two heads,” she says.

Barbra Bright, CKD, of the San Francisco-based Barbra Bright Design agrees, adding that, even in California where water regulations can curb luxurious add-ons, clients often indulge with multiple showerheads. “I can’t provide all the luxuries people see in the magazines...all the body sprays, etc. It’s just not happening here,” the designer says. “But I do put in a lot of regular showerheads combined with a rain showerhead so they have two options, along with a handheld.”

To address water concerns, several manufacturers have designed showerheads that optimize water delivery to make less water feel like more. “They’ve changed the size of the droplets and the rate they are delivered so even though you’re using less water, it feels like you’re getting more,” says Bright. “I recently stayed in a hotel that had one of these showerheads,

Barbra Bright’s clients often want a feeling of openness in their master baths. To accommodate this, she often includes floating vanities.



Photos: McKinney Photography



▣ Luxury in this master bath designed by Barbra Bright extends beyond the water features that include multiple showerheads and built-in tub. She also added a shower enclosure that extends to the ceiling, a skylight and a window next to the tub so her clients can enjoy the view.

and it's true...it does feel like you're getting a luxurious shower, even though water flow is being restricted."

Sandy Aromando, CKD, Euro Line Designe, in Somers Point, NJ, notes that some manufacturers also offer a 'pause' function to help conserve water. "Water is so precious, and water conservation is very important to me," she says. "I think people need to be aware of how much water they are using. There is a trade-off with some of these luxury water features and people should be conscious of that."

Steam is one luxury water feature that is more consumption friendly and has become a favorite amongst several designers' clients, including those of Bright, Besch and Toups-Fenton.

"Steam showers are huge, and they don't use much water," says Bright.

"Almost every high-end master bath we've designed in the last five years has included steam," adds Besch. "People love

them because they are comfortable, and they're great when someone is sick. If a client's budget doesn't allow for the unit to be installed right away, we prep for it so it can be added later."

Toups-Fenton's clients also love steam. "They are great for therapy, and we've done standard steam as well as steam with aromatherapy," she notes, adding that it's important to also include an appropriately sized fan to control the extra moisture and eliminate potential mold issues.

Aurora Fain, senior designer at Sweetlake Interior Design believes that additional water features can provide therapeutic benefits. "We have one client who gets massive migraines," she explains. "One way he reduces them is to take a shower, since the relaxing environment can help the migraines go away."

For clients who request body sprays, Toups-Fenton customizes them for the most beneficial experience. "We take height measurements of our clients so the body sprays are



Photos: Borchert Kitchen and Bath

Multiple showerheads are a must in master baths designed by Krista Buchholz. Oftentimes, she is also designing showers to be curbless with linear drains.



angled in the right direction,” she says. “Some people might like more pressure on their back to relieve back pain, so we need a full understanding from clients about what they want so the sprays will function correctly. There is actually a lot of science that goes into setting up the system. It’s very personalized and custom, and if someone is investing the money, we want to make sure the water hits in all the right places.”

Many of the master baths Aromando designs are for clients’ secondary homes, so although the more luxurious features may be included in their primary homes, she does indicate that outdoor showers are very popular. “People want to be outside, and they want to be relaxed,” she states. “I think outdoor showers offer great potential. They are similar to the cabana. Ten years ago, people weren’t doing them, but now they are a nice sale for us.”

In addition to luxurious water features, designers often include other elements that enhance the total shower experience, starting with a larger footprint.

“I do a lot of projects where my clients eliminate the tub and focus on a much larger shower,” says Besch. “They’re putting the extra money they save by not having a tub into body sprays, handhelds, rainheads and steam. Showers are sized comfortably so people can sit down in them, too. They aren’t the itty, bitty 3’x3’ shower stalls of the past.”

Buchholz also sees a trend toward more spacious showers. “A lot of people aren’t taking baths, so they will have a bigger shower,” she adds.

The extra space gives designers the ability to add amenities, such as benches and niches as well as other elements that create a more inviting environment and promote a feeling of openness.

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For example, Bright likes to heighten shower enclosures whenever possible. “A standard shower enclosure is about 72,” she explains. “That means you see a lot of open space above it. Visually, there is a barrier where the glass stops. I like to increase the height of that shower to the height of the door. If the ceilings are 8’ tall, that usually means the enclosure will be 7’ tall. If it’s a 9’ ceiling, the door and shower enclosure would be about 8’. It creates a nice visual and makes it look more luxurious.”

Bright also sees her clients requesting more shower panels, as opposed to full enclosures that extend from wall to wall. “When you look at the shower, it’s uninterrupted because the glass is clear,” she says. “Visually, clients seem to want more openness.”

Openness is also enhanced by eliminating the shower curb, which can make it easier for people to age in place.

“We have been doing a lot of zero-entry showers,” notes Buchholz. “People can age in place in their homes because they can walk right into the shower rather than stepping over a 4” curb. A lot of my clients are planning to stay in their homes and age in place, so they want to make it as accessible as possible.”

“Curbless showers have been this year’s big thing,” agrees Aromando. “We’re seeing a lot of homes where at least one bath is wheelchair friendly...something with a curbless shower that has a 60” radius.”

Eliminating the curb and adding a linear drain, which often goes hand-in-hand with curbless showers, also helps address potential issues that can occur with the addition of multiple water features, notes Toups-Fenton. “With many of these systems, you create a lot of moisture,” she says, explaining that the curbs in showers tend to break down over time because



Photo: Peter Nilsson

▮ This master bath is part of a loft conversion in the historic Donohue Building located in Chicago’s ‘Printers Row.’ Steve Besch designed the shower as an open shower, with body sprays, a rainhead showerhead and a hand-held shower.

of the excessive moisture. “By making a shower curbless and adding a linear drain, we are able to make the shower one level to accommodate the extra moisture.”

Buchholz and Bright also indicate that linear drains offer a cleaner, more modern look. “And since they are located off to one side, people aren’t standing in a center drain,” Bright points out.



Photo: Matthew Aromando, Mondo Studios

▮ Sandy Aromando, who designed this bath in collaboration with Logic Builder and Beach Dwellings, combined the tub and shower into a single ‘wet’ area.

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Photo: Peter Nilson



▣ Clients of Steve Besch who want to keep a tub in the master bath often choose a free-standing model. This one, accented with a 'water blade' faucet, serves as a central focus for the luxury shower to the right and the water closet to the left.

**RETURNING TO THE TUB**

While showers seem to dominate many master baths, there are still plenty of people who enjoy a luxurious bath. In fact, Bright indicates that many of her clients have been bucking the tubless trend and are making a return to the bathtub.

"I find that people who take baths are the ones who want luxury," says Bright, noting 'bath people' tend to linger longer whereas 'shower people' move quickly in and out. "They are the ones who really seem to care about luxury. They are the ones who ask for a window near the tub and a place to put their glass of wine."

Bright recalls one client who went so far as to put a tub outdoors. "They put a shower in their master bath, but if they want to take a bath, they go outside," she says, adding that she included a gas heater for warming up the cooler nights. "It's a red tub, a double one for him and his wife. It's in a private setting, right outside their bathroom. For them, it's all about the mood."

For Bright, as well Troups-Fenton and Besch, free-standing soaker tubs are most frequently requested. Bright often specifies that they be 66" to 72" long and 36" wide. "A standard tub is 60", but that is too small," she says, "and 72" is about the maximum [length] because larger tubs take too much water to fill."

Photo: Borchert Kitchen and Bath



▣ Designer Krista Buchholz is seeing increased interest in wall-hung toilets, which she says offer the benefit of saving space while contributing to a cleaner, less cluttered look.

Troups-Fenton's clients often prefer the sculptural look of a free-standing tub. "We're not using many jetted tubs," she notes. "Our clients are looking for free-standing tubs that look like a piece of art. Those that retain heat for a better bathing experience are especially popular."

When massage is requested, clients typically opt for air. "It's a cleaner system with finer air movement that still provides a relaxing feel," Besch believes. "Some tubs even come with remote controls to control the power of the jets."

**WATER-INDULGENT TOILETS & FAUCETS**

While toilets and sink/tub faucets may not be top of mind when considering luxury water experiences, clients have been taking notice of indulgences available in these products as well.

Troups-Fenton has seen increased interest in smart toilets, including those with bidet-type features and other luxury features, and smart faucets. "With the smart faucet, you can use your smartphone to communicate with the faucet," she explains. "You can fill your tub with water at a certain temperature and a certain depth. It's exciting technology and is about as luxurious as you can get."

Aromando often incorporates wall-mount faucets with trough sinks. "Since many of the homes I design are second homes, my clients are often entertaining guests," she says. "A 60" vanity with double sinks doesn't leave a lot of space to set anything down. With a trough sink you can still have two faucets, but you have more counter space. And by mounting the faucets on the wall, you eliminate the associated mess."

Bright has noticed increased interest in wall-mount faucets as well as in touch faucets. "Wall-mount faucets take less deck space," she points out. "And they provide a nice, modern look that coordinates with floating vanities and wall-hung toilets, which are also more popular."

"I also suspect that I'll be seeing more requests for touch faucets," she continues. "I've been including more of them in kitchens, which are great for when your hands are dirty. A touch faucet is also easier to use, and as people age in place, it's easier to touch a faucet than to turn a handle."

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Photos: Kenny Fenton

**ADDED LUXURIES**

The addition of aromatherapy and chromatherapy can enhance the shower/bathing experiences as can music, which is now available via Bluetooth in some showerheads, indicates Besch. “You can leave your phone on the counter by the sink and turn on Spotify or Pandora,” he explains, adding, “Sometimes it’s all about the little conveniences.”

Toups-Fenton often includes TVs, sometimes even in the shower, and surround sound in multiple locations. “I recently designed one shower with six body sprays, rainhead and overhead showerheads, a waterproof TV, a fog-free mirror and surround sound,” she says.

Bright’s clients are requesting larger windows and skylights if wall space is at a premium. “Larger windows are especially popular when clients have a free-standing tub and a great view,” she states. “They want to be able to look towards the outdoors. If they are in the city, I’ll try to create some sort of privacy.”

Bright is also incorporating more floating vanities as well as wall-hung toilets. “I’ve been taking everything off the floor as much as possible,” she says. “It makes the space look visually larger. Plus, you can see the tile all the way through, which has become important as my clients are beginning to pay more attention to tile. A wall-hung toilet also provides an added benefit of saving space, and I love the way it looks.”

Buchholz is also seeing more requests for wall-hung toilets. “They clean up the space,” she notes. “And since the tank is in the wall, they don’t take as much floor space. If you have a smaller room, you can gain quite a few inches by using a wall-hung toilet.”

Aromando has noticed an uptick in the interest for antique brass. “My clients are looking for a dark, antique brass...nothing shiny,” she says, noting it has been difficult to find coordinating plumbing fixtures and hardware since manufacturers have different renditions of the color. “We recently remodeled our showroom and the entire second floor is antique brass.”

Buchholz and Bright note that they are doing more radiant heat flooring and Buchholz also often adds heated towel bars for that extra luxury touch. ■



☒ ☒ This master bath designed by Sweetlake Interior Design is all about luxury. Water features include body sprays and multiple showerheads in the shower, and a sculptural freestanding tub that serves as a focal point for the space. Wall-mount lavatory faucets keep the countertop clean.