THE BEAUTIFUL NECESSITY
Bungalow Bathrooms Then and Now

By Anne Stewart O'Donnell

"If cleanliness is next to godliness," wrote Robert C. Spencer in a 1908 issue of *The House Beautiful*, "this is indeed a most godly age,—the age of comfortable and sanitary bath-rooms, and plenty of them, clean towels, and soap that floats."[1] Though his words were humorous, Spencer had reason to be proud of American progress on the bathroom front. Just fifty years before, in 1858, London had been paralyzed by the "Great Stink" emitted by the sewage-filled Thames during a disastrous summer heat wave. Cholera epidemics had killed thousands of Americans in 1866 and again in the 1880s. The role of germs in transmitting disease, and of hygiene in preventing it, had been understood for only a few decades, but during that time the technology of water systems, sewage treatment, and household plumbing had taken enormous leaps forward. The vast majority of mid-19th-century families had relied on portable tubs, washbowls, and chamber pots (and not surprisingly, given that water had to be hauled and emptied by hand, bathing was not the most frequent activity). By 1898, however, visiting Austrian architect Adolf Loos could report, "A home without a room for bathing! Impossible in America. The thought that at the end of the nineteenth century there is still a nation... whose inhabitants cannot bathe daily seems atrocious to an American."[2]

Above Vintage ads, such as this one from *The House Beautiful* (January 1913) portrayed the family bathroom as a temple of cleanliness, where the latest in sanitary technology helped parents instill the highest ideals of hygiene.

Opposite This elegant bath, carved from a bedroom and closet in a 1904 Foursquare-style home, captures the spotless look of the period, but uses creamy tones to avoid that "laboratory" feel. The architects, David Heide Design Studio, chose hexagonal floor tiles from Nemo Tile Company, 3x6 wall tiles from Original Style, and a decorative tile "liner" from Mission Tile West's Revival line. The Porcher sink with Lefroy Brooks hardware sits beneath a medicine cabinet designed by the architects and fabricated by Frost Cabinets. The ceiling grille is from Reggio Register; the sconces are antique, and the leaded window is original to the house.

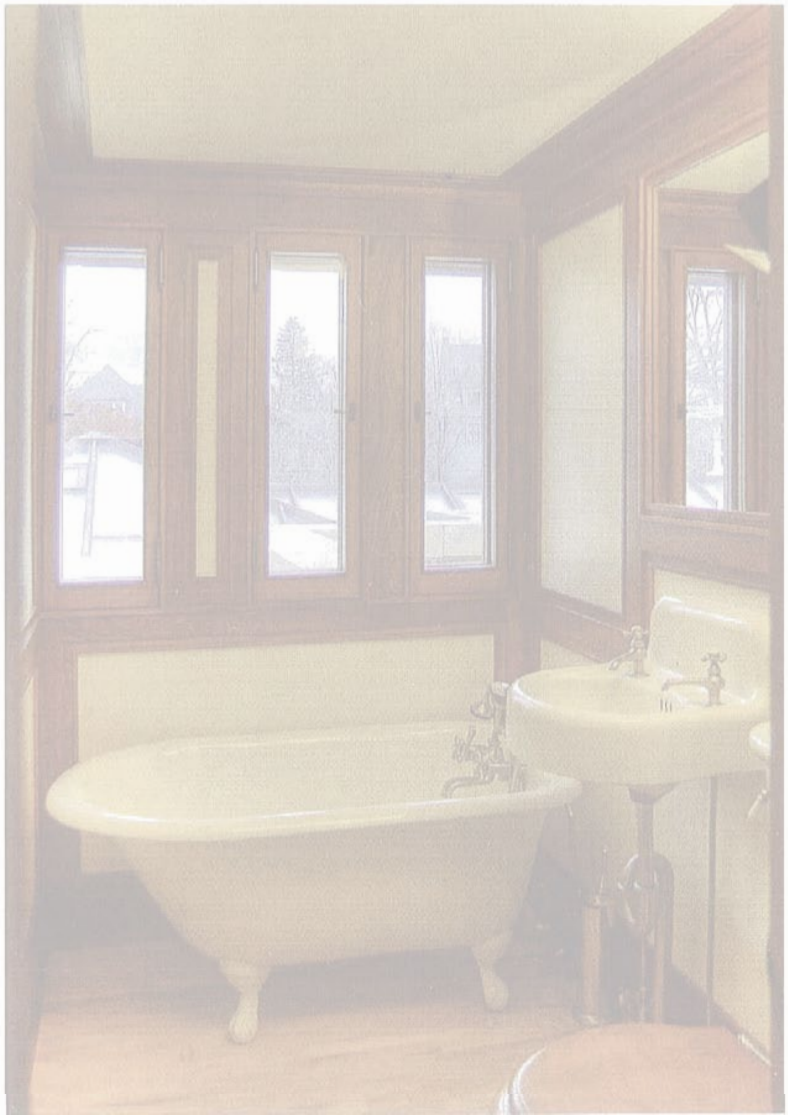
Photograph by Karen Melvin.

Above As these *House Beautiful* ads from 1913 attest, manufacturers were still working out a few kinks (such as the embarrassingly-loud flush). Yet upscale fixtures had become surprisingly sophisticated (this shower had multiple side and overhead sprays and a water-tight glass door).

A Sanitary Laboratory

Ten years after Loos penned those words, *The House Beautiful's* Spencer recorded that "in the best houses, as in the best hotels, every bedroom and suite must have its private bath," and that even "the little seven or eight room house must have at least one small room devoted to soap and water." Whereas homes of the early 1800s contained no special space for bathing, by 1900 architects routinely designed bathrooms as part of their home plans, with tiling and fixtures representing a sizable percentage of the cost of the home. In fact, architect Frank Lloyd Wright not only designed bathrooms, he also invented the first wall-hung

Below White plaster and porcelain combined with warm wood tones give a restful simplicity to this basic bath designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the chauffeur's apartment in the Carriage House of the Darwin Martin complex, Buffalo, New York. Hamilton Houston Lownie Architects rebuilt the demolished structure based on archival drawings, adhering as closely as possible to Wright's original plans. The heavy but crisply-lined moldings accent the narrow windows and set-in mirror; since the molding profile wasn't specified by Wright, the restoration team based it on examples elsewhere in the complex.

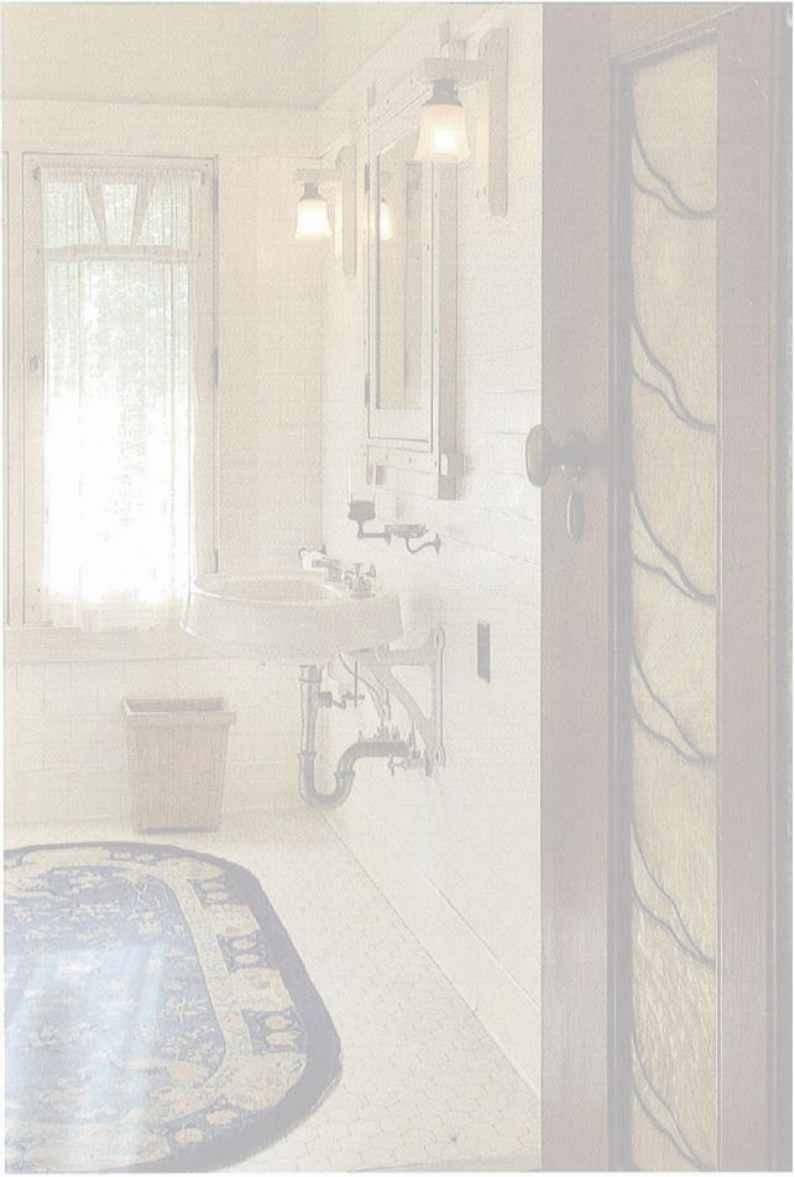


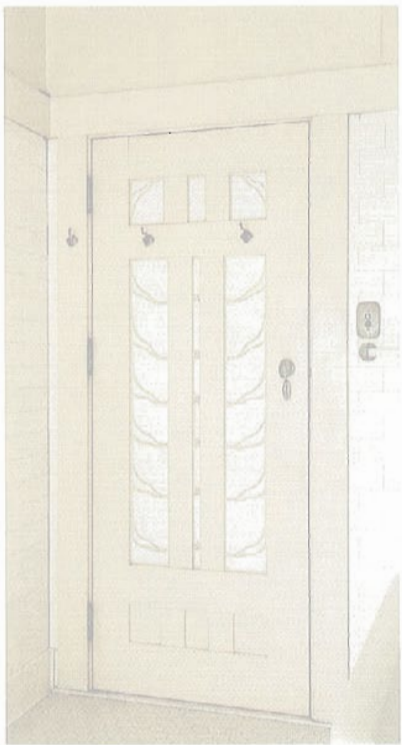
Photograph by Bernhard C. Wagner/©2004FBK. Courtesy of the Martin House Restoration Corporation.

toilet as an easy-to-mop-under fixture for the restrooms in his 1904 Larkin Soap Company building in Buffalo.

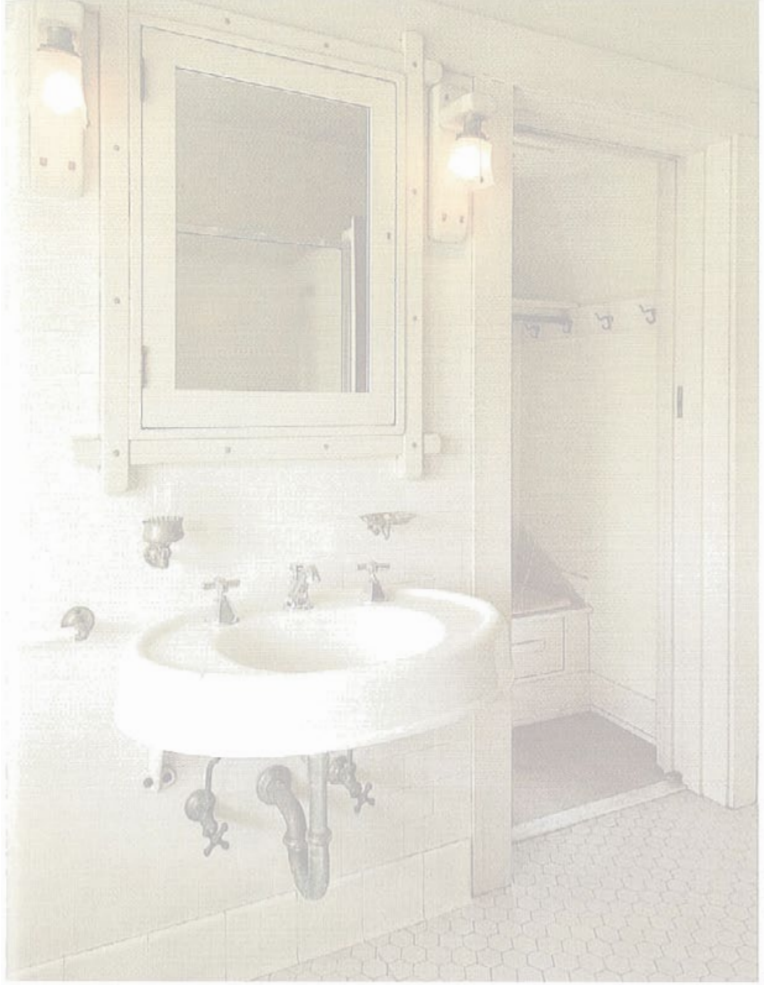
"Sanitary" was the watchword, above all, occurring repeatedly in turn-of-the-century advertisements, as well as in the names of companies and products (such as "the Iless Sanitary Medicine Cabinet," or "Sanola" nickel-plated soap dishes and towel bars). It also governed the appearance of the bath. Whereas tubs, toilets and sinks of the 1880s were often encased in furniture-like wooden cabinetry in order to hide unsightly plumbing pipes, early-20th-century fixtures were viewed almost as functional pieces of laboratory equipment: piping stood revealed, and carved wood cabinets were banished in favor of sleek, unornamented, non-absorbent porcelain or enameled surfaces. The iconic Victorian claw-footed tub, difficult to clean beneath and behind, lost popularity as the century opened to the more expensive double-walled bathtub, which was installed flush with walls and floor. Fixtures came in white only, and for wall and floor tiling, as Spencer remarked, "a white or cream color [is] used almost exclusively, doubtless for the reason that it gives to a room such an air of spotless cleanliness." Manufacturers encouraged the worship of cleanliness through ads that made providing the latest conveniences seem like a sacred duty. "For the sake of your children—for the tastes you are developing in them, for the clean lives you are training them to live—you need the beauty and perfect sanitation of 'Standard' bathroom fixtures," urged the Standard Sanitary Mfg. Co. of Pittsburgh.[3]

Today, we take the sanitary nature of bathroom fixtures and materials as a given—along with other factors that were apparently still of concern to the homeowner of 1910. Central heating, for instance: "'Cleanliness is next to godliness,' but requires a well-warmed bath-room for its full enjoyment, for only the hardiest men and women can bathe in a cold bath-room without endangering health," warned the American Radiator Company.[4] A steel medicine cabinet was billed as a better option than wood: "Never warps, shrinks, nor swells. Dust and vermin proof."[5] And one's choice of toilet might have serious social consequences—at least

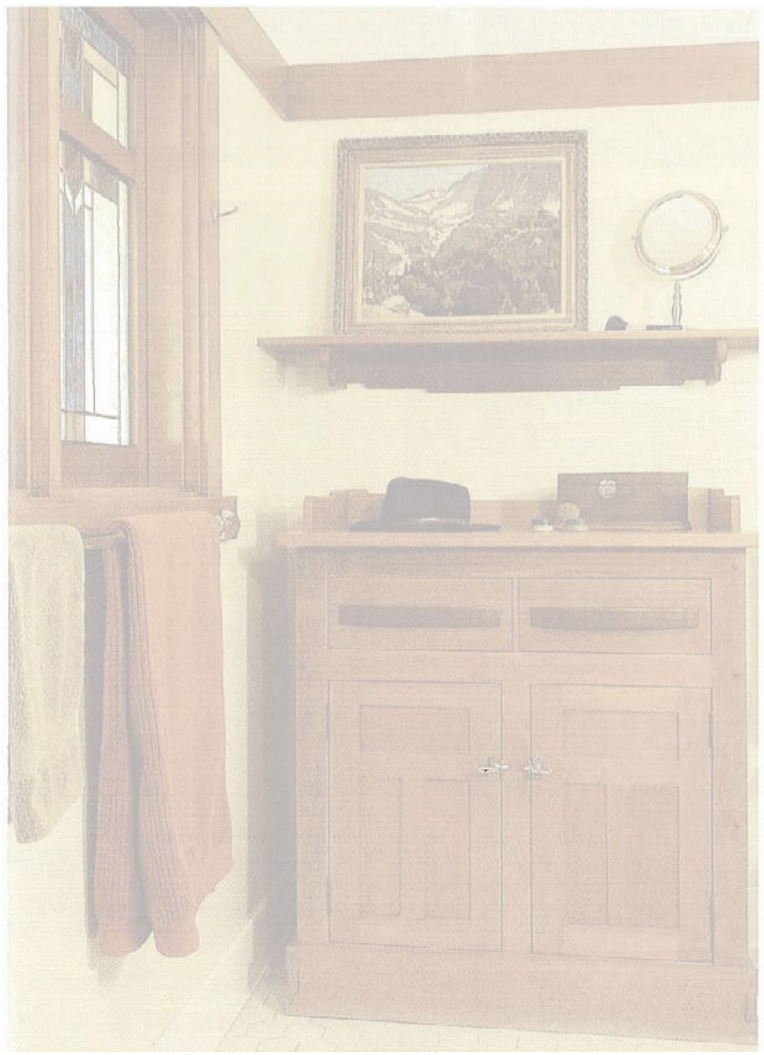




Right Original painted woodwork and white "subway" tiling characterize the second-floor bathroom at the Gamble House, designed by Greene and Greene in 1908. Since this bathroom opens onto a paneled main hallway, the architects filled the doorway with art glass, beautifying an otherwise-dark recess. A layer of milk glass inside the door adds extra privacy and harmonizes with the bathroom's lighter color scheme. *All photographs by David Mathias.*



Photograph by David Mathias



Photograph by David Mathias

according to the makers of the Si-wel-clo Noiseless Siphon Jet Closet:

> *You've often been embarrassed by the noisy flushing of the bathroom closet! And the more distinguished your guests, the more noise the closet made—and it seemed as though the water* never would *stop!... The Siwelclo was designed with but one idea—to make a noiseless yet sanitary closet. Properly install a Siwelclo in any part of the house—even in the* lower hall*—it is impossible to hear it in the next room.*[6]

Adding Beauty to Utility

By 1908, Robert Spencer considered the bathroom so well evolved in a sanitary sense that he urged *House Beautiful* readers to consider aesthetics as well as function—though not by following the ostentatious example of "a 'successful' patent-medicine 'doctor'" who "built a bath-room with a sunken marble pool, Tiffany mosaic wall, and glass dome, at a cost of seven thousand dollars, donated by the sick and hopeful." Instead, Spencer referred to "the average man...well satisfied with one good bath-room, fitted with the usual fixtures...installed in a sanitary and workmanlike manner in a room of the average size, which is about 6 by 8 feet," and discussed ways in which "the shrine of cleanliness may become a beautiful little apartment at a cost within the reach of many in whose homes it is merely a purely utilitarian feature."

For floors, he advised, hexagonal ceramic tiles or "tessellated tile mosaic" was attractive and sanitary, though "less

Top left Although the woodwork in the Gamble House master bath was painted, the architects gave it the same loving attention as the natural wood elsewhere in the home, specifying that the numerous coats of enamel be rubbed with pumice and steel wool between applications. Tiny plugs of natural wood—some circular, some square or rectangular—recall the ebony "pegs" used on furniture and moldings in more public parts of the house. A pocket door opens to a closet fitted with a drawer, shelf, hooks and bar for hanging clothes.

Bottom left With signature Greene and Greene elements such as a "cloud-lift" bracket, this built-in, natural-wood cabinet and shelf may have been original to the 1906 Bolton House, may have been designed by Henry Greene as part of a 1917 remodel, or may have been added later. Though sinks were not enclosed in the Greenes' day, this cabinet, with adaptations, could serve as a model for a present-day vanity.

Opposite Original fixtures at the Bolton House in Pasadena (Greene and Greene, 1906) include the kind of double-walled tub that superseded the classic claw-foot, which was difficult to clean under and behind. Wall tile extends all the way up to a band of molding running across the top of the windows, the mirror, and the door (not shown); this approach unifies the room and eliminates possible awkward joins where tile might "bump" a door or window frame.

What if your Stickley-esque 1930s bungalow has T'ang Red bathroom fixtures and purple and black zigzag tile? Don't rush to replace an original bath, writes renovating expert Jane Powell, even if it's not to your taste. Instead, play up its character with accessories, maybe even a painted mural. "Go with it. Go over the top with it. If it's pink... make it the pinkest bathroom on earth."

Below Earthy colors and textures—as shown here—could turn the average powder room into a walk-in piece of art pottery. Handcrafted by Trikeenan Tileworks, the tiles shown include the handpainted *Trees by Night* pattern; the handmade vessel sink is by Kristin Powers.

Courtesy of Trikeenan Tileworks, Keene, NH

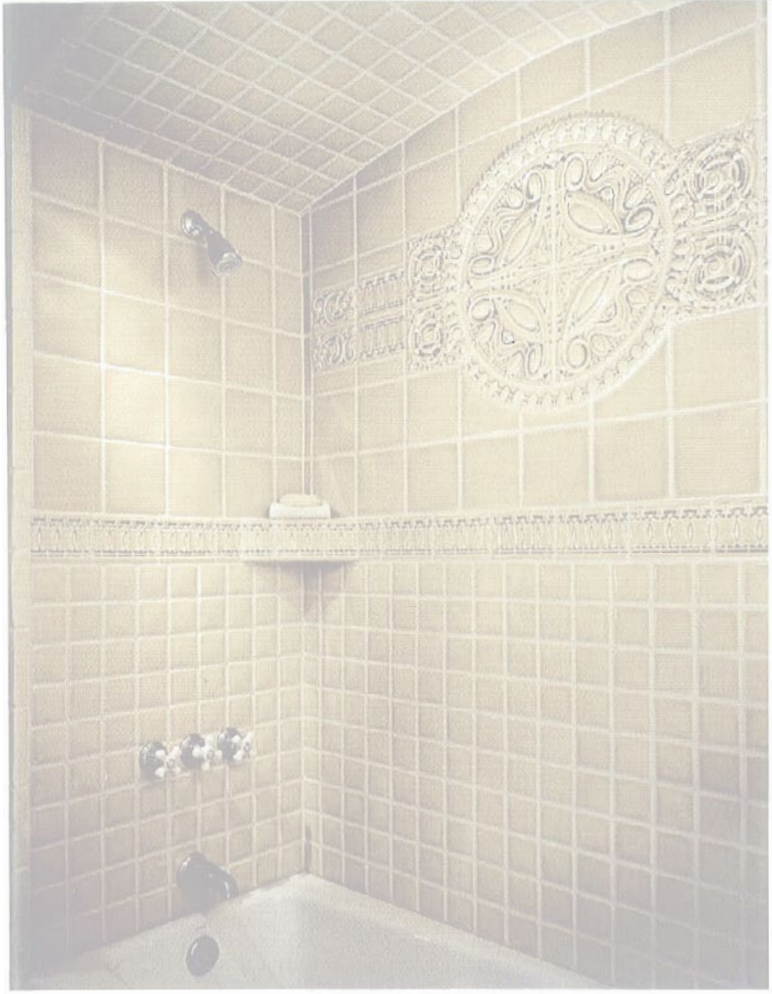
comfortable under foot that some warmer material like linoleum or interlocking rubber tiling." If linoleum was the choice, only the "heaviest and best grade" should be used; "all conspicuous patterns...should be avoided;" and edges should turn up in a cove where they met walls. For those walls, the "most popular and satisfactory" covering was glazed tile (or, perhaps, colored, opalescent glass tiles), which by preference should be carried up to a strip running around the room over the tops of doors and windows. To save money, tile could instead be installed as a wainscoting five feet high. Though wainscoting was often finished with a projecting tile molding, such moldings were often "awkwardly interrupted" at doors and windows, so a better course was to set the tile flush with the upper plaster walls.

And if "the average man" couldn't afford tile? "Painted or stippled walls are nearly as good and quite as sanitary as tile, though perhaps less luxurious in appearance," pronounced Spencer. Besides working as a budget alternative for covering large areas, paint could also provide accents appropriate to any income level, offering "as great possibilities for beautiful decoration as any other surface covering, as was demonstrated over two thousand years ago in the Roman houses at Pompeii and Herculaneum." The crowning touch for a simple but beautiful bathroom: "flat or vaulted ceilings, delicately enriched with...relief ornament."

The Kaleidoscope Explodes

In his 1908 article, Spencer noted that "some beautiful bathrooms have been built...in which Grueby and other similar colored tiles have been used for walls or wainscot. If color is used, however, it should not be too deep in tone, otherwise the white porcelain or enameled fixtures will appear in too striking a contrast." In 1926, this concern fell by the wayside for good when the Universal Sanitary Manufacturing Company produced the first line of colored fixtures, followed by Kohler and Crane.[7]

After a reign of more than 30 years, white suddenly appeared *too* sterile. Bungalows built in the late 20s and 30s frequently have bathrooms sets in rich shades such as T'ang Red, Ming Green, Persian Brown or Royal Copenhagen Blue, often with tile-work in brilliant complementary shades and jazz-age patterns. Among the tile manufacturers jumping on the new, colorful



Photograph by Justin Maconochie. Courtesy of Motawi Tilework, Ann Arbor, MI.

Mix it up a little. Faithful adherence to the style of a period home is the best approach in some cases; other situations call for a freer interpretation of Arts and Crafts.

bathroom bandwagon was Ernest Batchelder of Los Angeles, already well established as a maker of architectural tiles and recipient of several prestigious commissions to create tile-clad interiors and exteriors for public buildings. His Batchelder-Wilson Company issued its first bathroom catalog in 1929, offering "Patina Glazes" with a softened, weathered look quite different from the vibrant, high-glazed tiles retailed by some other firms. Furthermore, these tiles could be bought in subtle color combinations that were more versatile than any single shade. "A tile installation is permanent," advised the company, so

> *obviously there is argument in a tile scheme which gracefully adapts itself to changes in decorative treatment. Our MIXED BLENDS are carefully adjusted to this end. Each mixed blend has a definite, dominant color scheme, but there are subordinate notes designed to play harmoniously with the many minor tones of a decorative ensemble.*[8]

CREATING YOUR OWN "BEAUTIFUL NECESSITY"

In 1860, when the Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson urged mankind to "build altars to the Beautiful Necessity," he wasn't talking about bathrooms. Neither was architect and Arts and Crafts thinker Claude Fayette Bragdon, who borrowed the term for the title of a 1910 book on Theosophy. And neither were Bruce Smith and Yoshiko Yamamoto, authors of *The Beautiful Necessity: Decorating with Arts and Crafts* (1996).

Nevertheless, modern decorating books like Smith and Yamamoto's contain hundreds of ideas for beautifying any part of an Arts and Crafts home—including that smallest but most necessary of rooms. Another source of inspiration is the array of bountifully-illustrated volumes on Greene and Greene, Frank Lloyd Wright, Purcell and Elmslie, and other period architects. These studies often include a shot or two of a restored bathroom.

For more targeted advice and examples, try the following:

Bungalow Bathrooms, by Jane Powell, with photographs by Linda Svendsen (Gibbs Smith, Publisher, 2001). Powell presents a lighthearted history of fixtures, tile patterns, color palettes and the like, with copious advice on "Obsessive Restoration" vs. a more casual approach, and dozens of color photos to provide inspiration.

Bungalow Basics: Bathrooms by Paul Duchscherer, with photographs by Douglas Keister (Pomegranate Communications, 2004) offers modern and historic variations on the theme in a compact (almost pocket-sized) format.

The Well-Appointed Bath: Authentic Plans and Fixtures from the Early 1900s (Washington: The Preservation Press, 1989). The National Trust for Historic Preservation issued this reprint of two bathroom catalogs (Mott's, 1914, and the Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Company's, mid-1930s) to aid those renovating period homes.

The Tile Heritage Foundation (www.tileheritage.org), a terrific resource for anyone interested in antique tile or the modern revival of hand tile-making, sells reprints of dozens of period catalogs, including the Batchelder-Wilson Company's *Patina Glazes* (1929).

For a 3-D peek at bathrooms past, visit historic house museums. Those mentioned here are

Frank Lloyd Wright's Darwin Martin House Complex, Buffalo, NY (716-856-3858 or www.darwinmartinhouse.org)

The Gamble House, Pasadena, CA (626-793-3334 or www.gamblehouse.org)

Notes

[1] Robert C. Spencer, Jr., "Planning the House: the Bath-Room," *The House Beautiful*, April 1908, 28-32; [2] Adolph Loos, "Plumbers," in *Spoken Into the Void. Collected Essays 1897-1900*, trans. Jan O. Newman and John H. Smith (Cambridge: MIT Press 1982), 45-49, quoted in Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, *The Bathroom, the Kitchen, and the Aesthetics of Waste* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 25; [3] Advertisement, *The House Beautiful*, December 1912, xiii; [4] Advertisement, *The House Beautiful*, April 1908, 39; [5] Advertisement for the Hess Sanitary Medicine Cabinet Locker, *The House Beautiful*, June 1913, vii; [6] Advertisement, *The House Beautiful*, February 1913, xliii; [7] Gail Caskey Winkler, introduction to *The Well-Appointed Bath: Authentic Plans and Fixtures from the Early 1900s*. (Washington: The Preservation Press, 1989); [8] Batchelder-Wilson Co., *Batchelder Tiles: Patina Glazes* (Los Angeles: 1929), 503.