



Bathrooms in Vogue

Multi award-winning designer Natalie Du Bois shares her thoughts on the latest trends in bathroom design – talking about tiles, vanities, baths, tapware and lighting.

BY JOHN WILLIAMS. PHOTOGRAPHY JAMIE COBEL, KALLAN MACLEOD AND SIMON WILSON

Not so very long ago bathrooms were simple, utilitarian spaces, predictable in both layout and materials. Tiles were predominantly small and square, with a limited choice of colours, moulded synthetic basins were set on floor-mounted vanities and, more often than not, showers were an accessory over the bathtub. How times have changed.

There is now an almost infinite choice of colours, materials, finishes and products for your bathroom, which is great news for the consumer – up to the point a decision needs to be made. That choice then becomes a bewildering problem, which is where a professional designer enters the picture to work through the space planning and design, and also to help navigate through the myriad websites, catalogues and megastores.

Natalie Du Bois is one of New Zealand's most renowned and prolific kitchen and bathroom designers. Last month she

picked up yet another clutch of awards at the 2017 NKBA Excellence in Design Awards in Sydney, taking the honours for the best bathroom and best kitchen in Auckland, as well as the runner-up Supreme Bathroom award. So, it's fair to say she knows more than a bit about design and the latest trends.

"When clients come to me, they are usually a little confused because there is so much choice out there," says Natalie. "My job is to work with them to find out exactly what they're looking for and then to guide them through the choices they have in terms of suitability for their needs."

Injecting personality

"If I'm doing several bathrooms in a house, which often happens, I like to ensure each one has its own identity and is customised for the person or people who will be using it," she says. "But they all need to tie together in some way, such

as have the same floor tiles, or the same pattern but in a different shade or colour." Natalie tempers this by saying that you shouldn't go too crazy with colours or a theme because that could put potential buyers off if you decide to sell the house. However, painting a wall a fun colour is an easy way to transform the look of the room and it can be easily changed before you sell.

With vanities, Natalie likes to mix it up – and often custom-designs special pieces of furniture. "I try to make my bathrooms feel like another room in the house, not just a utilitarian space, by incorporating pieces of furniture like stools to stand next to the bath, or hand-painted cabinetry to give an authenticity to the room."

Luxurious baths

"I'm definitely finding that more people are wanting a bath in their ensuite bathrooms. Conversely, with family



There's nothing like the look and feel of real stone in a bathroom, says Natalie – but beware, most stone is porous, so needs sealing and regular maintenance.
Photo by Kallan Macleod



Natalie likes to use unique pieces and custom design her vanities wherever possible – they make the bathroom feel special and personal, she says.
Photo by Kallan Macleod

bathrooms, I'm getting more requests to take out baths and replace them with large, walk-in showers," she says. "These large, sculptural baths are not about cleaning yourself – if you want to wash, you have a shower – they are a luxury item in which you can relax and unwind, and that's why they're being put into the parents' retreats. And baths definitely seem to be more of a woman's thing, just as men prefer overhead rain showers," she adds.

Simple showers

With showers, Natalie's preference is for a level entry – no step – and also for the more discreet linear, slot-channel drains rather than a central one, as this type of drain requires cutting the tiles into a 'cobweb' pattern, which doesn't look great when you're using large tiles.

This simplicity extends to glass shower screens. Using a single sheet of glass or a frameless glass shower stall helps to make a bathroom feel less cluttered, as does the use of low-iron glass. "Low-iron glass is a type of high-clarity glass that is made from silica with very low amounts of iron. The low level of iron removes the greenish-blue tint that can be seen, especially on larger and thicker panels of glass," explains the designer.

These days Natalie finds she is installing more combination shower units that have both a slider and a rain/monsoon head. She says that manufacturers now have this option in virtually all of their ranges. "Why wouldn't you do it – they don't take up any more space, and they're very cost effective."

Black tapware?

Although Natalie admits black tapware can give a bathroom a striking look, she says she would only recommend it be installed in low-use areas, like guest bathrooms or powder rooms, as they need more upkeep to stay looking pristine.

"The same is true, but to a lesser degree, with the natural brass and copper finishes, both of which will definitely show signs of staining and visual aging before a standard chrome or stainless steel finish," she says.

Still on the subject of tapware, Natalie says it's not always necessary to match ranges or makes of tapware and shower fittings, but you should aim to at least have the same finishes throughout, like chrome, brushed nickel or satin. "The only place it gets a little tricky is with the toilets, especially with the big flush plates on the in-wall systems which, more often than not, have a chrome finish."

"I can't remember the last time I designed a bathroom with a shower over a bath." ~ Natalie



Photo by Kallan Macleod

Mixing tiles of different sizes, colours and patterns is an art that Natalie has mastered – and the results are stunning.
Photo by Kallan Macleod



Tonnes of tiles

The range of tiles available these days is mindboggling – almost anything you can think of can now be reproduced in the finest detail on a tile. Gone are the days when fake marble tiles really did look very fake.

“Porcelain tiles can now be made to look exactly like stone or marble, and they also have multiple patterns in each range, which means when they’re on the wall or floor, they are very realistic.”

She still loves using the real thing, though: “There’s nothing like the touch and feel of real stone,” she says. “However, most stone is porous, so needs to be sealed, and re-sealed every few years – marble and limestone especially. And contrary to popular belief, real stone is not necessarily more expensive, as some of the Italian porcelain tiles are very dear.”

Natalie goes onto say that there are two distinctive looks with tiles at the moment – one is minimalist, using super-large

tiles, or even whole sheets of porcelain that are the full height of the walls and, at the opposite extreme, is the trend for small, ornate and highly patterned tiles – like handmade artisan cement tiles.

“And it’s not just about the size, colour and patterns on the tiles,” she says. “There’s a huge amount of variety and creativity in how they’re laid. It’s about thinking outside the square – arranging them vertically instead of horizontally, or configuring different patterns, like a chevron, then mixing those tile patterns up, all in one space.”

Technology and lighting

Much like the rest of our home, there are lots of gadgets and gimmicks available for the bathroom these days, such as mirrors with TVs in them or multi-coloured lighting systems. However, Natalie says she feels that the bathroom is somewhere you go to to get away from all that stuff. “It’s the one place in the home that you can go to relax and unwind, and have some personal time. I’m OK with built-in speakers in the ceiling

or walls as part of an audio system for the whole house, but that’s about as far as I would go, personally.”

It’s different with lighting, she says. When you want to relax and have a bath, you need soothing, mood lighting, but if you’re doing your make-up or having a shave, then task lighting is essential. So you need both. Dimmers, decorative pendants, in-floor lighting, and lighting that comes on as you enter the room are options that Natalie looks at when designing her bathrooms.

“When you think about it, everything is cold and hard in a bathroom, so it’s good to be able to soften it or warm it up with lighting,” she says. “You can also use plants to make the room feel more relaxing, or bring the outside in by having larger windows. Even something simple, like replacing frosted glass panels with clear glass panels – like the top section of a sash window – can make a huge difference to your enjoyment, letting you see the colour of the sky and trees while you’re in the bath or having a shower.” 🏡



Photo by Jamie Cobel