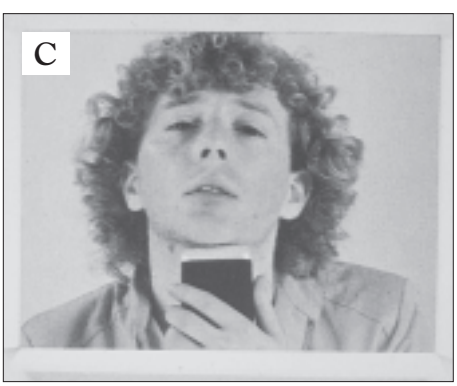
Lighting a Bathroom Mirror

by Nancy McCoy

As a lighting designer, I've seen many bathroom mirrors illuminated by a single recessed downlight mounted directly above the sink. This is a mistake — not only are the shadows from a downlight unflattering, but they make it hard to do certain tasks. As an example, look at photo A. The recessed light casts harsh shadows on the man's face and provides no light beneath his chin. The result is that he has inadequate light for shaving; a woman would also have trouble applying makeup in this light.



Good lighting should illuminate the entire face without casting shadows. A better strategy than downlighting is to place a diffuse light strip on the wall over the mirror. The plastic diffuser cover on the strip in B distributes light more evenly over the face, although the underside of the chin is still in shadow. An even better strategy is to place fixtures on either side of the mirror, as in C. I prefer those diffuse fluorescent strips that extend from the top to the bottom of the mirror; the bottom of the strip lights the underside of the chin, while the top lights the hair and the upper part of the face. If your clients don't like fluorescent fixtures, you can also light the face by mounting a pair of globe light strips or eye-level pendants on each end of the mirror. The best strategy is to combine the previous two, placing fixtures on each side of the mirror *and* above it. This will eliminate any shadows on the face or hair. Outlet boxes should be mounted about 60 inches above the finish floor for the sidelights, and 78 inches above the finish floor for the light above the mirror.

If your customer insists on downlights at the mirror, you can improve the situation by not putting them directly over the sink. Instead, flank the sink with a pair of lights — this will at least provide a cross of light coming from both sides. To minimize shadows, look for bulbs that give you a soft wash of light. An A lamp, an R flood, or a new compact fluorescent would be perfect. I prefer the new color-corrected compact fluorescents with an 80 Color Rendering Index and a 3000° Kelvin color temperature. Don't use spots or other directional lights: They will cast harsh shadows. And if at all possible, combine the recessed lights with side lighting. ■

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