

# A Narrow Bath for a Tight Spot

by Lee McGinley

**W**hen the owners first suggested to me the possibility of adding a new bathroom on the second floor of their Cape, I didn't give it much thought; it seemed like a straightforward enough job. But when the time came to make an estimate, there were some unusual aspects to the job that made it an interesting challenge.

The project began with a phone call asking me to recommend an architect. While the owners were not interested in full architectural services, they realized that their visualization skills were weak and wanted a design expert to offer some suggestions. The architect would work up a couple of schematics and then hand them off to me for pricing and execution.

## Wish List

The house is a typical one-and-a-half-story Cape with two ell's; the upstairs kneewalls sit in about 4 feet. The master bedroom is a good-sized space with skylights and V-match paneling on walls and ceiling. With an exposed brick chimney on one side, the room was warm and inviting. Its main drawback was the commode and small lavatory stuck against the wall just inside the door! Plus there was no closet.

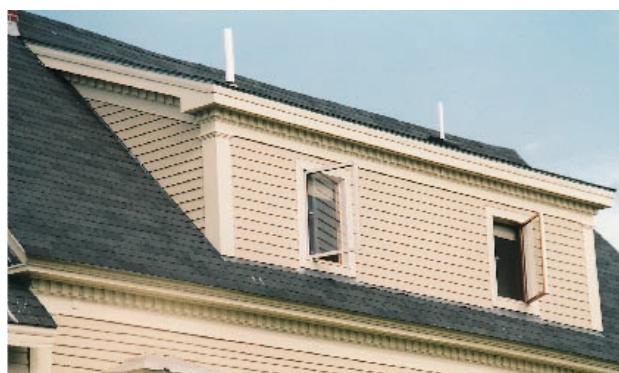
The owners wanted a full bath upstairs, plus closets for linens and clothes. They also wanted the bathroom to have plenty of sunlight for their houseplants.

## Possible Solutions

We considered a couple of solutions: Bump out the east gable of the bedroom and usurp some attic space above the

kitchen ell, or use the space between the north kneewall and outside wall by adding a dormer. The first solution would have created an awkward appendage to the house and necessitated extensive, and therefore expensive, plumbing work. The second solution seemed more promising, as the dormer area was located right above the first-floor bathroom. The existing upstairs commode could be rotated 90

degrees, thereby eliminating the need to reroute the floor joists. Although this would encroach on the bedroom space, the tradeoff was worth it, considering the reduced plumbing costs. The new bathroom would be located at the top of the stairs between the two bedrooms, in space previously occupied by a set of built-in drawers. Nevertheless, we would still have to shoehorn this into a very tight space.



The space behind the Cape kneewall (above left) provided the floor area for the new bath. A shed dormer addition gained the needed headroom (above right) and matched the simple lines of the Cape on the outside (left).

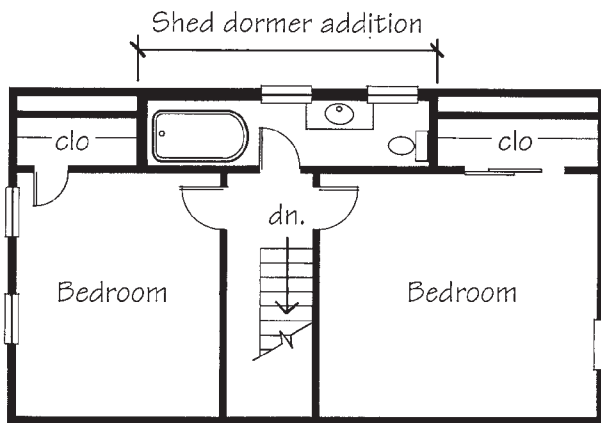
## First Attempt

The architect began his work and came back with a handsome schematic and birds-eye view of the house's exterior showing a new gable dormer. I was impressed. There was just one problem, though. Or maybe two. The dimensions on the schematic overestimated the future bathroom's width by a foot: Instead of having the 5 feet shown on the drawing, we were actually limited



dimensions and a shed dormer. I used Chief Architect to facilitate this process.

The new bathroom would be 4x12 feet, with some space borrowed from the bedroom. At the same time, the bedroom/bathroom wall would be extended to create a closet in the bedroom. To make the space inside the bathroom appear larger, we added a second casement window and decided to build a cathedral ceiling; the slope of



Putting the toilet at one end (above left) and the clawfoot tub at the other end (above right) created a sort of "galley" bath. Two windows and the cathedral ceiling give the impression of more space.

to 4. So some of the features the owners had hoped for — a built-in tub/shower, a linen closet, a surface-mounted medicine cabinet — were simply not possible. And the gable dormer, although handsome, was not in keeping with the simple lines of the Cape.

## Redesign

The owners agreed, so I set about redesigning the bathroom with actual

the shed roof would give the room more height.

Instead of a tub/shower unit, we opted for a claw-footed tub with the curtain rod suspended from the ceiling. With less mass than a fiberglass unit, the tub would make the room seem larger and more interesting. The owners discovered an antique marble lavatory top in the basement, under which I would build a custom oak vanity.

## Construction

Once we agreed on the new plan, we got to work. For the most part, the job went smoothly. In hindsight, however, I should have figured in more time (and money!) to cover all the trekking up and down the stairs. The owners let us set up a work area in the basement, but that was two levels below the new bathroom. We did have a bit of good luck: An earlier remodeling of the downstairs bathroom left us enough room to run drainpipes without disturbing the existing floor joists.

There was one thing we hadn't counted on, though: The outside wall of the house bowed outward and was not plumb from the floor to the girt. So we set a new 2x12 plate on top of the girt to straighten and plumb the wall. This left a shelf wider than the new 2x6 dormer wall to be built on top, so the owners took advantage of this as a storage shelf for small items — cosmetics, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and the like.

We added a few other details to make the bathroom more appealing. A louvered door allowed heat rising from downstairs to enter the room. (We made sure that the louvers slope up on the outside, affording privacy to those inside and promoting air circulation.) Two exhaust fan/lights were mounted in the ceiling, one over the tub, another over the commode, and a small electric in-wall heater adds supplemental heat on those chilly Maine winter mornings. The mirrored medicine cabinet was recessed into the wall, thereby making it less obtrusive in such a small space.

When I began this project, I had doubts about its outcome — the space just seemed too small. But the owners' excitement about having an upstairs bath encouraged me and when the project was completed, I was pleasantly surprised: My suggestions for creating the illusion of more space and the owners' choice of fixtures work together to create a very usable bathroom.



*Lee McGinley is a Certified Remodeler and owner of McGinley & Co. Fine Building in Casco, Maine.*