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Accessible Showers

by Dave Holbrook

Sooner or later, you're likely to be asked to outfit a bathroom in an accessible manner, to accommodate a physically challenged user. In our aging society, it probably isn't a matter of if, but when.

The ADA (Americans With Disabilities Act), UFAS (Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards), and ANSI (American National Standard Institute) all spell out the requirements for public access compliance. You won't encounter official enforcement of these guidelines in a residential installation, yet they provide a good model for any barrier-free design. Consider them carefully with your client before you deviate from the pattern. Although there are sure to be custom considerations pertaining to individual needs, many of the questions you'll have, such as fixture placement and area requirements, are already addressed by manufacturers who comply with the published standards and target the barrier-free home market. The National Association of Home Builders (800/638-8556, www.nahb.com) offers

a free annual *Directory of Accessible Building Products*. In this article, we'll look at the features, functions, and special installation requirements of some ready-to-go barrier-free shower enclosures.

Replacement Stalls

The need for an accessible shower often occurs suddenly, following surgery or an injury. Remodeling an existing bathroom can be complicated and costly. The smallest allowable accessible shower stall should have a 36x36-inch interior dimension; a fixed, full-length sidewall seat opposite the controls; and a minimum 36x48-inch adjacent access area. This is known as a "transfer shower," accommodating those who must transfer from wheelchair to shower while seated. Because of these area requirements, the average 5x9-foot bathroom, often with a tub-shower unit spanning the narrow dimension, can be tricky to remodel. However, the same 30x60-inch area occupied by a typical tub unit also works for an accessible shower, and stall manufacturers offer many styles of

one-piece replacement units. Getting a replacement unit in the front door is half the battle, so consider this before choosing a one-piece model (see Figure 1). Because of the considerable retrofit market, manufacturers also offer a wide selection of three- and four-piece units.

Luxury Bath specializes in acrylic tub liners and replacement showers. A typical 30x60-inch replacement shower costs \$1,800 installed by a certified dealer-installer, and normally requires only a day to complete. The 1/4-inch-thick, ABS-backed acrylic base can be adapted to fit existing tub drain locations, simplifying installation. Company president Davis Grassberg asserts that the material can be whacked with a hammer without chipping. Valves, fittings, hand-held sprays, seats, and grab bars are extra-cost but essential options. The company doesn't offer a curbless, or roll-in, unit, but the low, 3-inch-high threshold may be satisfactory in certain transfer applications. (However, ADA guidelines permit a maximum 1/2-inch-high curb only in a 36x36-inch enclosure; "shower stalls that are 30 inches by 60 inches [760 mm by 1525 mm] minimum shall not have curbs.")

Roll-In Showers

The requirements for a roll-in shower, necessary for those who must remain in a wheelchair while showering, are stricter than those for a transfer enclosure. Although standard 30x60 tub dimensions provide adequate replacement space, the curb prohibition makes water retention a real problem. You'll want to waterproof the adjacent area, or the entire floor, and preferably slope it toward a drain, which takes you beyond a simple cover-up or tear-out-and-replace job. Furthermore, the adjacent approach area should measure an unobstructed



Figure 1. An accessible replacement shower unit may be too large to get through the front door. Many units are available in multi-panel kits for that reason.

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36x60 inches for maneuverability.

You'll want a fixed seat in a 30x60 enclosure, too. The ADA guidelines specify that the seat must be foldable. This seems to be a sensible provision for any enclosure, whether required or not. Best Bath's Access fiberglass shower stall walls incorporate plywood backing for seats and grab bars and can be ordered complete with factory-installed plumbing, seat, grab bars, a flexible "roll-over" threshold, and a convertible, "semi-permanent" threshold to accommodate changing needs. Prices for completely equipped three- and four-piece remodel units range from \$2,180 to \$3,060, plus installation.

Swan's solid-surface barrier-free shower floor and wall panel system comes in up to 30 colors and fits in a standard tub area. The wall panels can be installed directly over existing walls or tile (Figure 2). The company also offers a cut-to-fit removable aluminum threshold to contain runoff during non-roll-in uses. Removable thresholds typically secure to the shower floor with some version of a set screw, making swap-outs simple, if not routine.

Many premanufactured roll-in enclosures are made with a minimal 2-inch-high threshold, providing a sloped interior for water containment. However, this requires that the floor framing or slab incorporate a 2-inch-deep stall-area recess to eliminate the entry barrier. If recessing isn't practical or feasible, removable ramps can be purchased to ease the transition over a low threshold (Figure 3).

Models with 1/2- and 3/4-inch-high thresholds are also available; those require no floor recess at the drain location but a 10-inch-diameter cutout in the subfloor instead. The drainage slope in these units is relatively shallow, and the cutout is required to accommodate the dropped profile of the base at the drain. If necessary, a fill-layer of ply-



Figure 2. A kit that installs directly over existing wall and floor finishes can speed the conversion process.



Figure 3. Ramp kits are available when recessing the base isn't feasible.

wood or cement board underlayment can be used to elevate the adjacent floor area outside the unit.

Slip resistance underfoot is a hallmark of any safe shower base and essential in an accessible unit. Acrylic and fiberglass units typically feature an integral texture for traction. Although an incised crosshatch pattern is effective, Best Bath feels it's too "aggressive" and offers instead an antislip, orange-peel texture that meets ADA standards. Swanstone's solid-surface base also provides a slip-proof patterned surface. For

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Figure 4. A shower curtain provides privacy, a degree of water containment, and unobstructed access to the shower area (left). An accessible shower can make a small bathroom feel larger, but the controls should be easily adjustable from outside the enclosure and the approach unrestricted (right).

durability, maintenance, and appearance, a subtle molded texture is preferable to aftermarket self-stick traction strips.

Doors. Space restrictions may force you to enclose the shower with a curtain. In fact, a curtain is the most common enclosure because it can be fully retracted. But if you plan to install a glass door, make sure that it won't obstruct the controls, so they can be adjusted before entering the shower. The controls should be offset to the entry side of the shower for the same reason. The door should also be of a type that won't obstruct transfer from a wheelchair to the shower seat (Figure 4).

Universal fit. The more I look at accessible showers, the more sense they make, regardless of how you get around. The unrestricted, open look of the stall can help make a small bathroom feel more spacious. Along with the safety and comfort features, you get versatility. You can't beat a shower seat, a hand-held spray, and a little more elbow room when the dog needs a bath. Children can reach the controls as easily as adults. You don't even have to own a wheelchair. 

Information

For a free copy of the *ADA Standards for Accessible Design*, contact:

U.S. Department of Justice

Civil Rights Division

950 Pennsylvania Ave. NW

Disability Rights Section — NYAV

Washington, DC 20530

800/514-0301

www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/stdspdf.htm

For a free copy of the *Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards (UFAS)*, contact:

U.S. Access Board

1331 F St. NW, Suite 1000

Washington, DC 20004

800/872-2253

www.access-board.gov/ufas/ufas-html/ufas.htm#4.9

Sources of Supply

Aqua Bath

Nashville, Tenn.

800/232-2284

www.aquabath.com

Best Bath Systems

Boise, Idaho

800/727-9907

www.best-bath.com

Clarion Bathware

Shippensburg, Pa.

800/576-9228

www.cfmcorp.com

Disabledshopper.com

Tucker, Ga.

678/382-3701

www.disabledshopper.com

Lasco Bathware

Anaheim, Calif.

800/877-2005

www.lascobathware.com

Luxury Bath

Glendale Heights, Ill.

800/354-2284

www.luxurybath.com

The Swan Corporation

St. Louis, Mo.

800/325-7008

www.theswancorp.com

Tub Master

Orlando, Fla.

800/833-0260

www.tub-master.com