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Powder Rooms Get Primped in Public Venue Showhouse

The designers who worked on the powder rooms in this unusual showcase of design in Scarsdale, NY used grand illusion and ingenuity to make them over sans a major tear-out.



SCARSDALE, NY- Homeowners were not part of the process in the redesign of The Rowsley Cottage, a 19th century Victorian mansion located in this suburb of New York City. This fact, however, did not mean the designers involved in this showhouse had free reign.

Because the home, which was built in 1858 and has been owned by the Scarsdale Woman's Club since 1928, is used as a cultural and catering venue, designers had to adhere to Westchester County and ADA requirements when altering certain

existing elements. That, coupled with the cost of the work, kept many of the designers in check when working on their rooms.

This did not mean, however, that the latest incarnations lacked imagination or style. The designers who worked on some of the home's powder rooms mixed existing fixtures with new ones, blending bold elements with the home's elegant style.

'Library' Bath

The small space and outdated 1930s décor were among the challenges confronted by Barbara Bell, ASID, owner, Barbara Bell Interiors in Tarrytown, NY, in her assigned powder room. While she chose to gut the bathroom and start from scratch, she kept the water lines, fixture positions and structural column intact.

"There was a projecting wall that held all of the electrical lines for the house," she explains. "We had some leeway in cutting it back, which we did, approximately three to four inches so that it aligned with the other walls when you walked into the powder room."

In creating the design concept, Bell wanted to add depth to the long, narrow space. "I came up with the idea of the bathroom as a library," she remarks. "It's kind of a play on words - when people say they're 'going to the library.'"

Bell began with faux library wallpaper on the right hand walls of the entryway. "It created the feeling that the wall continued, that it had depth," she comments. The cabinet maker then built actual cabinetry around the wallpaper, "so that one whole wall looked as though it was bookcases," she explains.

Across from that wall and throughout the room itself, a faux finish in dark tan gives the remaining walls the look of leather, she adds. Barrel vaulted arches on the ceiling also provide a sense of progression into the space, Bell notes.

Once inside the room, an alcove holds a vanity skirted in dark brown silk, topped with a light brown marble countertop and undermount sink in beige from Kohler Co. Antique brass fixtures add a traditional, elegant touch, according to Bell, as does the antique mirror, which surrounds the vanity on three sides. Two antique sconces provide soft lighting, and are joined by halogen lights and an antique chandelier.

The pièce de résistance of this room, Bell stresses, was the toilet. A beige Kohler toilet was topped with a mahogany 18th century English cane chair for the show.

Opposite the toilet, a 13" LCD television screen built into the faux bookcase provided the occupant with entertainment.

Sisal installed over the original tile floor expanded the space and "worked beautifully with the library scene," notes Bell. "It made it feel more like a living room than a bathroom."

The Neutral Zone

Referred to as the "Groom's Lav" by the Scarsdale Women's Club because it is usually used by the groom when the site hosts a wedding, this bathroom was given an updated neutral look with a French twist. Carol DeBear, ASID and president of DeBear Designs Inc. in Scarsdale, NY, used rustic colors that are reflective of Provence landscapes and characteristics of the chateaux of Burgundy for her design, according to the Club.

The 10'x10' powder room was gutted and a door to an office was closed off to give the room a full back wall. The walls are tiled up 8' from the floor in two different tile designs, both from Walker Zanger.

The sink remains on the same wall as the original, though DeBear centered the new fixture. A custom-made console features "three types of intricately detailed natural wood and three panels in front, with the center panel opening for storage," she notes. On the marble countertop rests a neoclassic bronze basin from Linkasink. Wall-mounted, antique bronze faucetry from Rohl completes the look.

Though it is in the same spot as the original fixture, a new Kohler toilet in cream is now separate from the rest of the room for privacy.

The 10' ceiling features a trompe l'oeil painting, while a medallion from Italy highlights the stone floor, which was also provided by Walker Zanger. Two gilt wood wall sconces and a ceiling chandelier finish the room.

"Now the room crosses over male or female," says DeBear. "I think anybody would like it."



Circus Life

The fact that this was a public space weighed on Virginia Tesi's design for her powder room. The room, which featured three toilets and two sinks, couldn't be altered dramatically, so she wanted to come up with an idea that would work with the existing fixtures.

"I thought, 'what in the world am I going to do with this space so that it doesn't look so commercial,'" Tesi, president of Virginia Tesi Designs, Inc. in New York, NY, relates. Though she liked the idea of a three-ring circus, she wondered how she would make one look like it belonged in a Victorian home. "But, I started thinking about Cirque de Soleil and the Moscow Circus, and I realized that they'd already done it. So it was no problem at all," she reports.

Tesi began by covering the toilets with round stands and painting the seats. She then had slipcovers made for the tanks that translate into a stage for a circus act. "You can sit on the seats, use them and flush them - it was all very functional," she observes. The wall behind the toilets was faux painted with a circus act in a diamond pattern. "I made each stall the backdrop of a circus act, and I put a huge circus tent over the stalls," she explains.

Across from the toilet area, a vanity was built around the two sinks that resembles a traveling trunk. "We finished the vanity in a high gloss paint, added brass corners, old travel stamps and a big antique lock," reports Tesi. She also painted the original sinks, using permanent paint pens to make markings in keeping with the circus motif.

A large mirror over the sinks is surrounded by makeup lighting to make it look like a theatrical mirror. "I put some clown makeup out and things of that nature, so it would actually look like a clown pulled his trunk off of the train, put it down and set up his makeup," she states. Halogen lights in different colors hang from the ceiling, adding to the overall ambiance of the space.

Finishing the powder room is a puppet show set up in the 10' window, and a vinyl tile floor in a diamond pattern in complementary colors.

"This home acts as a meeting house and catering venue where fun and playfulness would add to any event," emphasizes Tesi, "and this room capitalizes on that idea."

