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How To...Design a Healthy and Sustainable Bathroom

In the newest addition to WLLW's How To... series we offer strategies for crafting a bathroom space that contributes to your overall wellbeing.

WORDS Elissa Rose

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SPACE WELLNESS SUSTAINABILITY

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The bathroom holds a unique place in the home. It's a space of daily rituals and quiet retreat, where practicality and self-care meet. From hurried mornings to restful evenings, it shapes the rhythm of our days. As a room we depend on for refreshment and renewal, the bathroom deserves thoughtful attention to its design and impact on wellbeing. Ensuring it is a healthy, sustainable space is about more than aesthetics; it's about creating an environment free from harmful materials, one that nurtures both body and mind.

Whether it's a family bathroom, a serene ensuite or a compact powder room, designing with care can turn this essential room into a healthy, personalized haven. It's important to note that every bathroom is unique, and its design should be tailored to fit your specific space, lifestyle, budget and family needs. For instance, a busy family bathroom might prioritize durable materials and efficient storage, while a spa-inspired ensuite could focus on relaxation and wellness elements. Thoughtfully aligning these priorities with your personal circumstances ensures a functional and harmonious design that works for you.





Bathroom designed by Rose Uniacke. Photo courtesy of Rose Uniacke

Materials and Finishes

The materials you choose for your bathroom do more than define its style – they directly influence your health and the environment. Many conventional [paints](#), sealants, and finishes release [Volatile Organic Compounds](#) (VOCs) into the air. These chemicals can contribute to [indoor air pollution](#), leading to respiratory irritation, headaches and even long-term [health risks](#) such as asthma and liver or kidney damage. High concentrations of VOCs are especially harmful in small, enclosed spaces like bathrooms, where ventilation may be limited.

Switching to low- or zero-VOC paints and finishes is a simple yet impactful way to create a healthier bathroom. [Mineral paints](#), for instance, go a step further. Made from natural ingredients like clay, lime and chalk, mineral paints are free of synthetic chemicals and emit no harmful gases. Additionally, their porous nature allows walls to 'breathe', preventing moisture buildup and reducing the risk of [mold](#) – an essential benefit in humid bathroom environments.

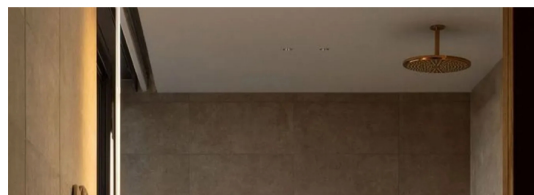
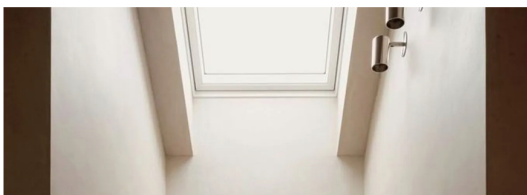
For cabinetry and storage, reclaimed wood or repurposed [vintage](#) pieces offer a dual benefit; they bring unique character to your bathroom while reducing demand for newly harvested materials. Their lower environmental footprint, combined with the absence of the synthetic adhesives often found in particleboard, makes them a healthier and more sustainable option.

"The bathroom holds a unique place in the home. It's a space of daily rituals and quiet retreat, where practicality and self-care meet."

When it comes to countertops and flooring, natural materials like granite, marble or slate are excellent choices. Unlike synthetic surfaces, which can contain harmful resins or chemical finishes, natural stone is durable, timeless, and free from toxins.

Eliminating plastic wherever possible is another significant step toward a healthier bathroom. Plastic shower curtains, for example, often release [phthalates](#) and other harmful chemicals into the air. Biodegradable options, such as hemp or linen curtains, are free of these toxins. Alternatively, [glass](#) shower enclosures are a durable, long-term investment that is easy to clean and completely free of [off-gassing](#) concerns.

For bath mats and towels, organic cotton or bamboo textiles are ideal; also seek out [Global Organic Textile Standard](#) (GOTS) and [OEKO-TEX](#) certifications to ensure their provenance. Conventional [textiles](#) are often treated with chemical [dyes](#) and finishes that can irritate sensitive skin or release toxins over time. Organic options provide the same level of comfort and absorbency without compromising health, and their natural fibers are also gentler on the planet.





Heatherhill Beach House designed by Norm Architects. Photo courtesy of Jonas Bjerre-Poulsen



Bathroom designed by Norm Architects. Photo courtesy of Jonas Bjerre-Poulsen

Energy and Water Efficiency

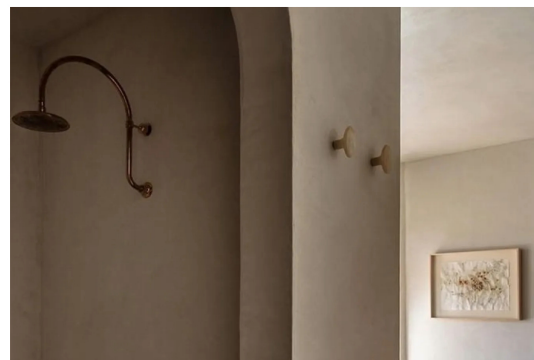
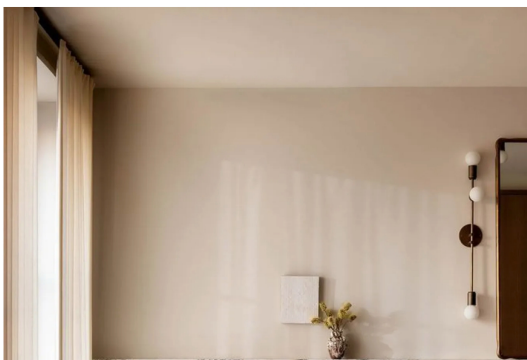
The bathroom is one of the most resource-intensive areas of the home, consuming significant amounts of water and energy daily. Installing high-efficiency fixtures is one of the most effective ways to save water without sacrificing comfort or performance. Toilets with the [WaterSense label](#), for instance, use up to 20 percent less water than standard models, thanks to innovations like dual-flush systems that allow users to adjust water usage based on need. Similarly, low-flow showerheads and aerated taps maintain strong water pressure while reducing overall consumption. These modern fixtures are designed to combine functionality and efficiency, often recouping their initial cost through reduced water bills over time.

[Energy-efficient](#) appliances further enhance sustainability in the bathroom. Tankless or high-efficiency water heaters ensure you use only as much energy as needed to heat water, reducing waste. LED lighting is another key component, offering exceptional energy savings while providing long-lasting illumination. Unlike traditional bulbs, LEDs emit less heat, making them ideal for enclosed bathroom spaces and significantly lowering electricity costs.

Water Filtration

Water quality is a critical yet often overlooked aspect of bathroom design, as it is often only considered in the context of cooking or drinking. Unfiltered water can contain chlorine, [heavy metals](#) and other impurities that may irritate the skin and hair. Adding a water filtration system to your bathroom can improve both health and comfort.

Showerhead [filters](#) are a quick and cost-effective solution for removing chlorine and other contaminants. For a more comprehensive approach, consider installing an under-sink filtration system or even a whole-house [water filter](#). These systems ensure cleaner water throughout your home, benefitting your entire household.





Designer Elaine Santos and Mowery Marsh Architects turned to Passive House criteria to design a New Jersey townhouse. Photo courtesy of Haris Kenjar



Bathroom with raw stone floor designed by Jake Arnold. Photo courtesy of Jake Arnold

Lighting

Good lighting in the bathroom does more than improve visibility; it also supports your overall wellbeing. Since the bathroom is one of the first and last rooms you use each day, lighting choices and the incorporation of natural light where possible, can significantly influence your circadian rhythms.

Energy-efficient LEDs with adjustable color temperatures allow you to tailor the lighting to different times of the day. Bright, cool tones energize morning routines, while warmer, dimmer light creates a relaxing atmosphere for evening wind-downs. Adding motion-activated night lights ensures safe navigation without disrupting sleep cycles.

For an extra layer of comfort, candles made from soy or beeswax with non-toxic wicks, such as those crafted by Wax Atelier, can introduce a soft, natural glow to the space, perfect for creating a spa-like ambiance.

Hygiene and Maintenance

A healthy bathroom starts with surfaces that are easy to clean. Ceramic tiles, with their smooth, non-porous surface, naturally inhibit mold growth, while quartz countertops are highly resistant to stains and bacteria, making them an excellent low-maintenance choice for wet environments. These materials also support a healthier home by minimizing the need for harsh chemical cleaners that can harm indoor air quality. White vinegar and baking soda, for instance, work together as a powerful combination for tackling soap scum, hard water stains, and odors; baking soda's mild abrasiveness is perfect for scrubbing tiles and grout, while vinegar dissolves limescale and disinfects surfaces.

Proper ventilation is another key component of maintaining a hygienic bathroom. Energy-efficient exhaust fans effectively manage humidity, while operable windows provide a natural ventilation option. Together, these measures reduce the risk of mold and mildew, ensuring a safer environment for you and your family.





Home in New Jersey designed by Ursino Interiors. Photo courtesy of Nicole Franzen



Powder room design by Ursino Interiors. Photo courtesy of Nicole Franzen

Storage

Clutter can undermine even the most thoughtfully designed bathroom, so efficient storage solutions are essential. Wall-mounted cabinets, recessed shelves or multi-functional furniture can maximize available space while keeping everyday essentials within easy reach.

Using storage baskets or dividers helps organize items like toiletries and towels, maintaining a tidy and relaxing environment. Integrated storage solutions can also serve as a design feature, allowing you to display small plants, candles or other personal touches.

Wellness and Relaxation

A bathroom designed for relaxation can be a true sanctuary. Features like soaking tubs and rain showers create opportunities for unwinding, while indoor plants add a touch of nature and improve air quality. Consider low-maintenance options like ferns or peace lilies, which thrive in the bathroom's humid environment.

To enhance comfort, use soft organic textiles and choose a color palette with warm, neutral tones that evoke a sense of calm. Sensory elements like essential oil diffusers or bath salts can add an extra layer of luxury, turning everyday rituals into moments of retreat.



Brentwood Park, California home designed by Jake Arnold. Photo courtesy of Michael Clifford



Bathroom in a Cape Cod Bay home designed by Jaimie Baird. Photo courtesy of Nicole Franzen

Simple Strategies for a Healthier Bathroom

- **Materials:** Use low-VOC paints, reclaimed wood and natural stone for environmentally sound finishes. Replace plastic shower curtains with linen or glass.
- **Water Efficiency:** Install low-flow fixtures like dual-flush toilets and aerated taps to conserve water.
- **Lighting:** Opt for energy-efficient LEDs with adjustable tones.
- **Water Filtration:** Add showerhead filters or under-sink systems to reduce exposure to impurities.
- **Ventilation:** Use energy-efficient exhaust fans or operable windows to manage humidity.
- **Storage:** Maximize space with recessed shelving and wall-mounted cabinets to reduce clutter.
- **Relaxation:** Add rain showers, indoor plants and warm textiles for a spa-like experience.



Bathroom and lighting designed by Rose Uniacke. Photo courtesy of Rose Uniacke



Bathroom designed by Ursino Interiors. Photo courtesy of Tim Lenz

Feature Image: design by Norm Architects, plaster by Clayworks, photo by Jonas Bjerre-Poulsen

Photography: Rose Uniacke, Jonas Bjerre-Poulsen, Haris Kenjar, Jake Arnold, Nicole Franzen, Michael Clifford, Tim Lenz

FURTHER INFO

[Healthier Materials Lab](#)

[Water Quality Association](#)

[Green Building Alliance: Air Pollution \(Air Sealing and Ventilation\)](#)



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Invisible Series: What's Really in Your Home - The Bathroom Edition

Dive into the makeup of your bathroom, from the tiles underfoot to the vanity, understanding the hidden chemicals in common items and learning how to create a healthier, safer space.

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WLLW's comprehensive guide can help you select textiles that support health, comfort and the environment.

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