

SHOP TALK

WHAT'S NEW ON THE HOME FRONT

Turning a bath into an ultra luxury

By Chuck Green
Special to the Tribune

When Richard Lathan decided to replace his cast-iron tub a few years ago, there was no question about it: He was going to buy another one. His wife, Felicia, however, had other ideas.

"She wanted something new, something that made bubbles or pulsated. I said 'no, no, no.' I didn't think we needed anything like that," he said.

Nevertheless, instead of a cast-iron tub, the Lathans, of Tower Lakes, purchased a BainUltra ThermoMasseur.

Richard Lathan doesn't regret the about-face. "Now that I'm retired, I work out in the garden and I get fairly dirty, and I just don't get as clean taking a shower. I find it very relaxing to just sit in the tub and have a bubble bath. It's like an escape. I use it more than Felicia."

Like the Lathans, more people are turning to the bathroom as a private retreat, a place to "get away" in the safety of their own homes, according to the National Kitchen and Bath Association Design Trends survey.

"There's definitely a movement. I'm involved in a couple of publications, and all the people who submit articles are telling us that bathrooms generally are becoming more interesting," said Jim Krengel, an author who has been a bathroom designer for 35 years. Among the publications he helps edit is Designer Kitchens & Baths.

"Every study we've seen points to the fact people are spending more time at home, inside their homes. They're turning their homes into that true sanctuary. I think there's little doubt that as people start weighing options, such as going to a health club, they'd rather just stay home and use their whirlpool, jetted tub or Jacuzzi," he said. "In the 1970s, bathrooms were really hot, then they dropped off. People are trying to see them as an escape."

People like Jeni Schmidt of Palatine, who also purchased a BainUltra about five years ago.

"My ultra bath is kind of like my haven: it's where I go and re-

very relaxing to the soul. I view it as a mental kind of drain for my brain of all the stress," she said.

BainUltras cost \$1,700 to \$5,000. Unlike conventional baths, the BainUltra is based on the interaction between water, air and heat, along with natural additives, like oil and salts, which can be used without harming the tub, since its system is based on air injection rather than water flow. Strategically placed air jets throughout the bath create an acupressure effect over the entire body. Exactly what Schmidt had in mind. While she needed a respite, Schmidt didn't think a Jacuzzi was for her.

"At the time, we only had a shower in our bathroom," she said. "I like to take long, hot baths, so we kind of worked on redoing that whole bathroom area. I really didn't want a Jacuzzi because I thought it would bounce me all over the place."

Even her husband, Gary, who prefers showers, occasionally uses the tub. "He's more physically active than I am, so he uses it for longer periods of time at a stretch when he's got a muscle pull or something," said Schmidt. "I think it's more a physically therapeutic thing for men for aches and pains. On a normal day, he rushes out of the shower and gets to work."

Just like Tom Mordini, who got a BainUltra tub about 2½ years ago and installs them in homes in his contracting business. "I mainly use it because, after a long day's work, it's relaxing. It's not something I do all the time because I'm the type of person who likes to get in the shower and, boom, I'm done," said Mordini, a Lake Forest resident. "I don't want to burn up 20 minutes sitting in a tub. But there are the days you're working outside and you're just cold all the way down to bone, and that's when it's a huge advantage, because it feels good and it's relaxing."

Krengel said that while many people would like to spend more time doing things like sitting in a tub, in "the real world," it's not always easy.



The Naos tub from BainUltra has a Roman-inspired dish base, which also camouflages its piping.

salivate to be at home when they're sitting in traffic, but they've lost so much time coming and going to work, it's difficult for them to say, 'I'm going to spend an hour in my spa.' I think people want to use it, mean to use it, but just haven't always gotten around to it."

Mordini gets around to using his tub about once a month, or once every other month in the summer.

"I use it more in the winter because, as a contractor, I'm outside a lot, dealing with the temperature. I usually do it before I go to bed," he said.

Like Schmidt, he doesn't like what some whirlpools do to his body.

"The BainUltra provides a relaxing type of massage feeling. It's like putting your hands in a glass of champagne with the bubbles. I've never been a big hot-tub person because they rough you up. When I was doing my house, I was looking for some type of tub, and I knew I didn't want a whirlpool."

"It's a matter of personal choice," said Krengel. "I think all [the tubs] have their place; some people like air and some people like water. I've never heard anyone [talk about being roughed up]. A lot of that is perception; some people might feel a whirlpool or Jacuzzi is too intense. Maybe the air bubbles are just a little more gentle."

"It's a massage essentially. You don't have the jets barreling

41 in Highland Park, said of the BainUltra. "You can use oils and other additives without fear of it getting caught in the jets or residue, like with a Jacuzzi. That's one reason customers love it."

Including Mordini's wife, Kathy. "That was probably the biggest selling factor to my wife. She uses it three to four times a month," he said.

The ability to use additives in the BainUltra also was a clincher for Sally Kaulas of Wilmette. "What sold me on it is the fact you can put sea salts, herbals and bubble bath in it."

The BainUltra, available in seven series with 40 different models, requires no maintenance. There are no pipes or valves, only a turbine that can be placed up to 15 feet away from the bath to reduce noise. An air jet system drains all standing water and removes any excess water through an automatic drying cycle.

As a contractor, Mordini also said he's seeing a trend toward more people transforming the bathroom into a spa, mainly because they're remaining in their homes longer instead of relocating.

"I think that since interest rates are so low on equity loans, people figure it's easier to fix up their current house than it is to move. You get settled into where you're living. They'd rather invest the money into what they have. It's a comfort thing.



Available as a clawfoot tub or freestanding, the BainUltra Cella model adds a touch of class to your bathroom.



BainUltra's Thermal Oval Addition features a built-in head rest and arm rests.

tubs and bathrooms. And they say, 'We use the bathroom enough, let's put some money into it.'

"You have to ask yourself: Will the investment be worth what you put into it for the use you'll get out of it?" said Krengel. "If the answer is still yes, go ahead."

Like Mordini and Krengel, Bryan Zolfo, showroom manager at Insignia Kitchen and Bath in Barrington, said more people are turning their bathrooms into a "spa-like space."

"People are really so much more into the function of their bathrooms now. I think it's been that way since 9/11; the growth in all of the home-based businesses and industries was only enhanced by people wanting that feeling of security. The bathroom is the only place in my home where there's no phone. With cell phones and faxes and laptops and everything.

The tub is an ideal refuge after a round at the gym to Susan Waters, a bath specialist at Insignia.

"I work out a lot, so it's very invigorating to get into the tub, especially since I can add oils and lotions," said Waters. "I love what it does for my skin."

Don Hanus, owner of Algor Plumbing and Heating Supply in Cicero, where he sells the BainUltra, admits that, at first, he was skeptical about the tub. In fact, it took a trip to a spa to convince Hanus that it was for him. Now he owns one too.

"All these years, people [were] telling me how great the BainUltra Bath is," said Hanus, an Arlington Heights resident. "I was probably the last person that they could sell that concept to. But I actually stayed in a hotel that had them in it, and it was an incredible experience."

For more information, call BainUltra at 800-463-2187 or visit