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Real Estate

Ditching the Tub

By JILL KRASNYDEC. 26, 2017



Rajeev Basu replaced the 1950s-era tub in his Greenwich Village co-op with a modern, marble-tiled shower. "I just don't think most young people care about having a tub," he said. Credit Brad Dickson for The New York Times

When Rajeev Basu was planning the bathroom renovation in his studio co-op in Greenwich Village, designers and architects issued the same warning: Don't get rid of the tub. He ignored them.

"I was thinking of what I want, and whoever I sell to next," said Mr. Basu, who is in his mid-30s and a writer at Spotify's in-house creative agency. "I just don't think most young people care about having a tub."

Out went the unsightly salmon-colored tub, which looked as if it dated to the 1950s. In came floor-to-ceiling marble tiles from Porcelanosa, a frameless glass panel and a chrome Lanikai rain shower. The project, which began in June 2015, cost between \$35,000 and \$40,000 and took about six weeks.

For years, the common wisdom among both brokers and designers was that every home needed a tub. But changing lifestyles and the demand for more space are now driving some homeowners to swap out their tubs for chic, high-end showers.

For New Yorkers, and millennials in particular, a tub-to-shower conversion is "the chance to make the bathroom appear more open," said Michelle Landau, director of design and a principal of Tristate Sustainable, a general contractor in Manhattan. The frameless doors of these modern showers look more stylish and are easier to clean, she said. And the lavish shower fixtures that some apartment owners are splurging on are ones they will actually use and enjoy — unlike the fixtures on tubs, which tend to have fewer bells and whistles.

When you consider that many young professionals don't have time to soak in a bath, Ms. Landau said, "the clean lines, convenience and aesthetic opportunities make the choice obvious for most of our clients."

Not that there's anything wrong with a bathtub. But "if you're going to go with a tub, it's go big or go home," said Jason Haber, 40, an associate broker at Warburg Realty, who, along with his family, owns 14 multifamily investment properties in Manhattan and Brooklyn.

Claw-foot and free-standing tubs appeal to buyers, Mr. Haber said, but they are more common in new-build apartments, where the master bathrooms can be as big as the price tags — and perhaps out of reach. So when he oversaw the condominium conversion of an 89-unit rental building on 48 West 138th Street, he told the developer to replace the tubs in the studio and one-bedroom apartments with fancier showers to make the spaces feel larger. "When the building went on the market, people freaked out for the bathrooms," he said. "Having the stall showers instead of the tubs was a big selling point."

Tamara Eaton, an interior designer in New York City, said that given the choice, most of her clients "much prefer double showers with large niches for products, hand showers and a little ledge for shaving." As she

put it, “If you are not a habitual bather, the next time you’ll take a bath after you’re six years old is maybe when you’re 85.”

Of course, in New York City, not just any shower will do. Upscale brands like Boffi, Scavolini, Porcelanosa and Grohe are popular, as are four-figure features like linear drains, rain-shower heads, smart sensors and hand-held sprayers. Tile is often made of high-end materials like marble, natural stone or industrial-looking concrete porcelain, Ms. Landau said. And a built-in bench, LED lighting and radiant floors frequently enhance the spa-like experience.



Sandra Fernandez didn't want a bathtub in the bathroom she renovated in her West Village co-op because she thought an open shower made it feel more spacious. A tub, she said, "wouldn't look right." Credit Brad Dickson for The New York Times

“We wanted to do something that was cleaner and extended the bathroom,” said Sandra Fernandez, 54, an education consultant, who spent about \$30,000 last year to renovate one of two bathrooms in her West Village co-op. “With how modern the apartment looks,” she said, and her expansive contemporary art collection, “there was no way you could have a tub in there — it wouldn't look right.”

While it is legal for New York City apartments not to have tubs, many tub-to-shower conversions require approval from a building's manager and architect, who review and consult on the project, a process that can take several weeks and drive up construction costs, said Michael Zenreich, an architect in Manhattan who performs such inspections. The plumber working on the project must also obtain a limited alteration application, or LAA, which can delay things another couple of weeks. And all shower enclosures must be waterproofed and be handicap compliant, in accordance with the Fair Housing Act and a national Standard for Accessible and Usable Buildings and Facilities, Mr. Zenreich said.

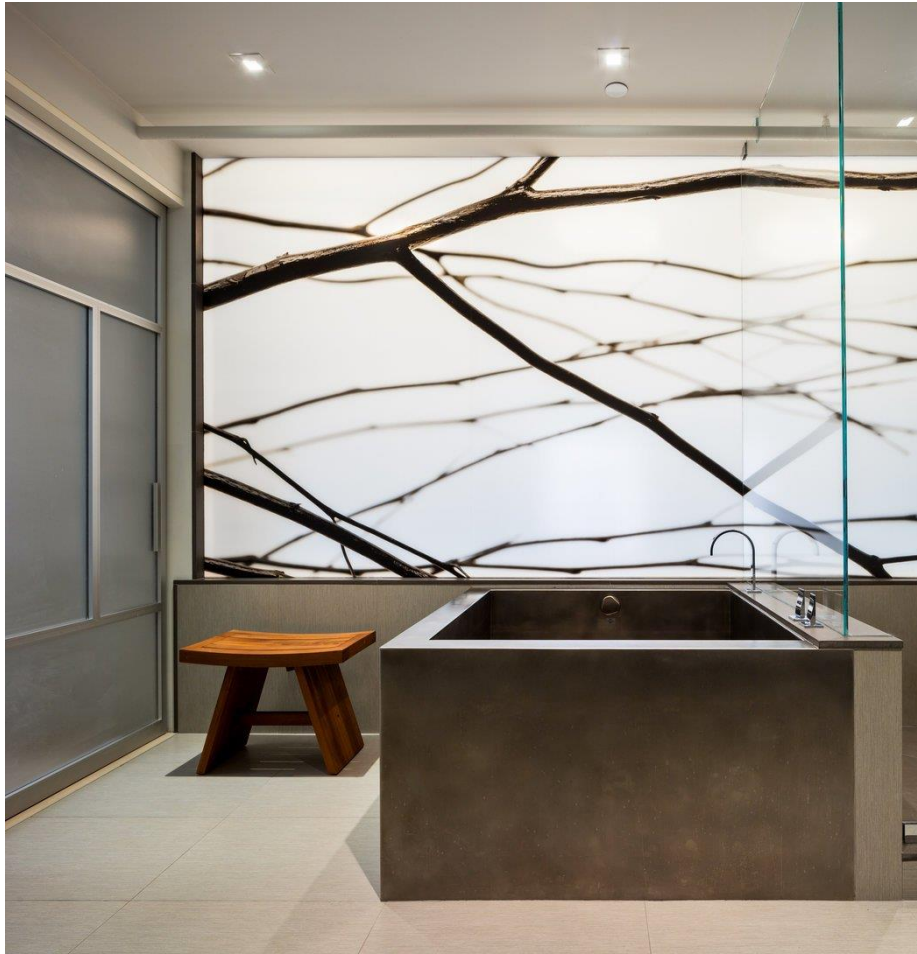
Beyond the time and financial commitment involved, there is also the risk of turning off those potential buyers who see a tub as a necessity.

"If people walk into an apartment and there's no bathtub, they say, 'Whoa, how am I going to bathe my children?'" said Julie Gans, a broker at Triplemint. "In larger family apartments and new developments, the master baths will have shower stalls and the secondary bathrooms will have tubs, because they realize the end user will be someone who needs a tub."

There is no definitive data on whether ripping out a tub could harm resale value — or any way to quantify how many people are doing that — said Jonathan J. Miller, president of the appraisal firm Miller Samuel. But "for a young family, not having a tub is an issue," he added, "so the risk of impacting the value rises as the apartment size rises."

In her experience, said Katherine Salyi, a broker at Sotheby's International Realty, "for a studio or one-bedroom, removing the tub is not going to have a great impact on sales value, and oftentimes it will enhance the value of the home," sometimes by as much as 10 percent. But "for a two-bedroom or two-bathroom apartment, if you were to take away all the tubs, it would have a negative impact."

Some designers disagree. "The real estate broker will say, 'If you ever want to sell, you want to have a tub to wash children,' and I think that's absolute nonsense," said James Mansfield, chief executive of West Village General Contracting. For the past five years, he has encouraged all of his upscale clients, even those with multiple bathrooms, to rip out their tubs. "I'm saying put \$70,000 into your bathroom and watch it go up every year. Your house gets more valuable because of the alterations."



For Jack Briggs, a film producer who lives in NoHo, a large tub is a luxury and a place to relax. Credit Brad Dickson for The New York Times

Of course, die-hard tub fans like Jack Briggs, 64, a film producer, will always find more value in a luxurious bathtub. His custom-made stainless-steel tub cost \$8,000 and was installed two years ago at his apartment in NoHo, in a renovation designed by Mr. Zenreich, the architect.

“Part of the reason I got the tub was I had the space,” said Mr. Briggs, who also has a large shower.

But his tub, he pointed out, complements his minimalist décor and is a joy to relax in: “The Japanese habit of sitting and soaking in a tub is a really nice way to end the day, calm down and get away from everything.”