

Making the Most of a Narrow Bathroom



Photos by John Anderson except where noted

Joe Cracco

Raising the ceiling
and tweaking the
floor plan opens up
a cramped space

by Joe Cracco

As part of the renovation of a 225-year-old Rhode Island farmhouse, we had to remove an upstairs bathroom's tilting toilet. At first our plan was merely to repair the subfloor and replace the existing vinyl with wood flooring. However, when we dug deeper, we discovered the rot that tipped the toilet was more extensive than we'd thought, and the entire floor would need replacing.

Gutting the 5-foot-by-12-foot bathroom would further strain the budget for this project — but it would also allow us to design a more pleasing and better-functioning space, one that would maintain the simple feel of the house. Our main challenge, aside from budget constraints, would be to make the long, narrow room feel spacious and accommodating.

Making the Most of a Narrow Bathroom

Stolen Floor Space

Since we were removing the flooring anyway, relocating the fixtures was relatively easy. Though the floor joists of the old post-and-beam sagged, they were still plenty strong. That meant we could sister on 2-by members to level the new floor — a less intrusive approach than disturbing the ceiling below to level the joists.

To move the toilet, we reframed one section of the floor, creating a channel for the drain we were extending from the existing stack in the outside wall.

The bathroom's width was limited by the hallway, but we were able to lengthen the space 4 feet by annexing an adjoining closet at each end. We also created more pleasing proportions by visually dividing the new, longer space into

three smaller areas: an entry vestibule at one end, the tub/shower at the other, and the main bath — including the vanity and toilet — in the center.

Added Headroom

Like the other upstairs rooms, the bathroom had an exceptionally low ceiling — only 6 feet 2 inches high. It gave the space a boxcarlike feel.

So we decided to raise the ceiling over the central section and shower area. To remove the ceiling joists, we had to support the main ridge for the length of the bathroom; we did this only after studying the framing to make sure we had a continuous load path through the wall framing on the first story all the way to the ground.

Cathedral ceilings can be tricky to insulate — especially in bathrooms, which generate moisture. Because this old house was extremely leaky to begin with, we couldn't justify the expense of using high-density spray foam in the rafter bays. Instead, we carefully cut rigid foam to fit tightly in the shallow bays, used cans of expanding foam to seal the joints, and were careful to detail the drywall installation so that it would work as an effective air barrier.

To keep humidity levels down, we installed a Panasonic WhisperLite 110-cfm fan, exhausting it directly through the roof through a short length of 4-inch-diameter insulated duct. This low-noise (1.5 sones) fan is a high-efficiency unit rated for continuous use;



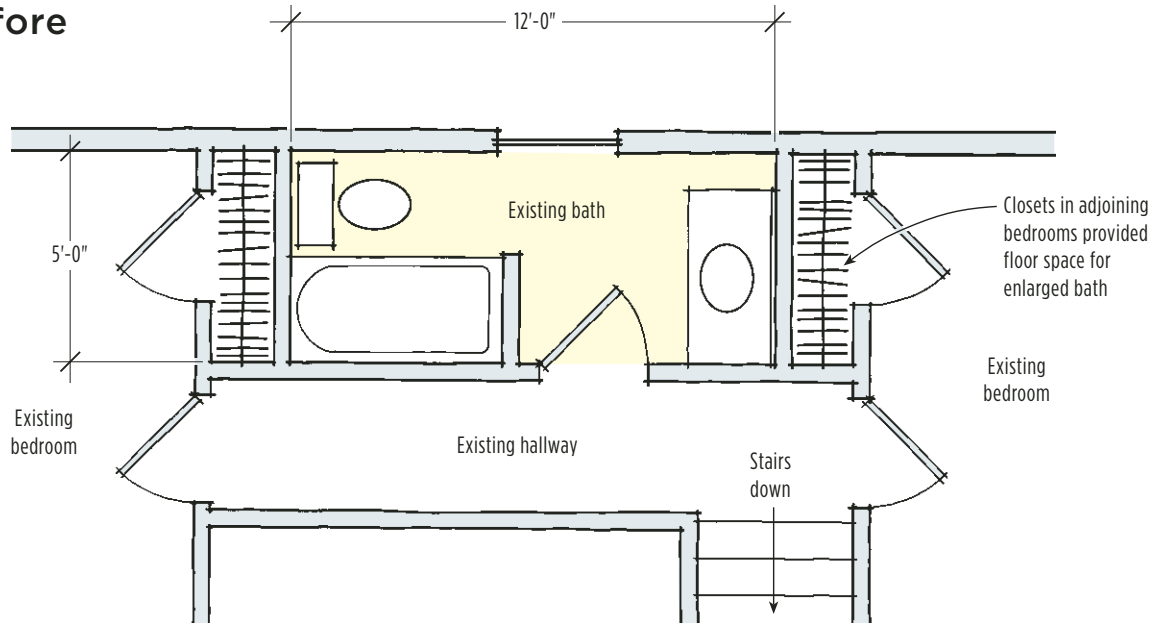
A vanity mirror placed across from the window makes the room feel wider (above), while a dropped soffit partition above the shower doors (right) visually shortens the space, making it feel less like a boxcar.



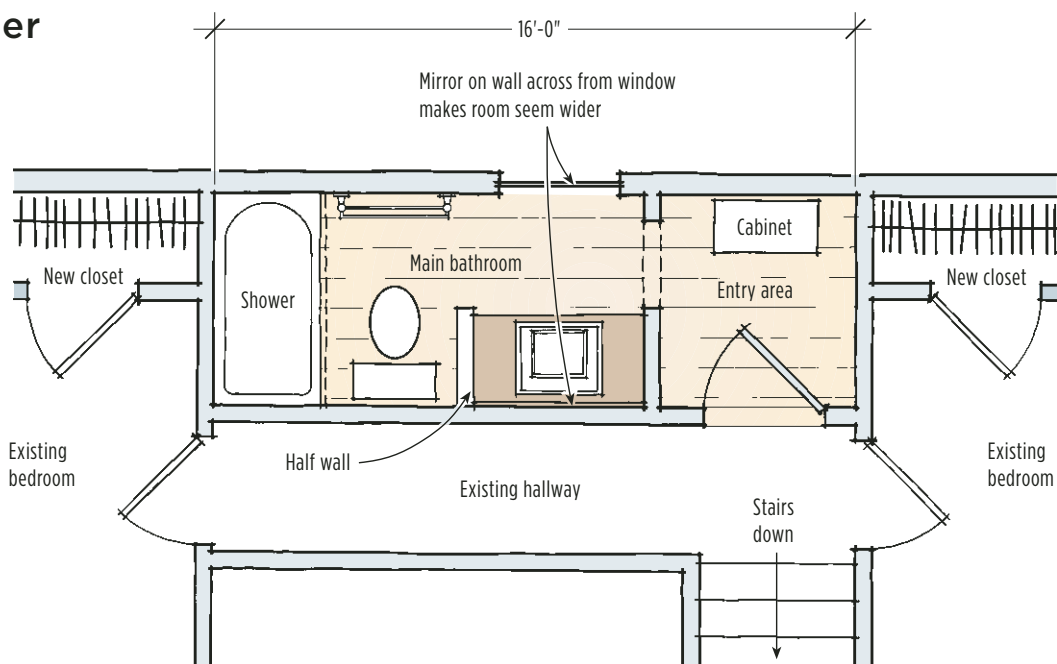
Joe Cracco

Improved Floor Plan

Before



After



Adding floor area, relocating fixtures, and dividing the room into three distinct areas helped make this narrow bathroom feel more spacious and function more efficiently.



we've installed it in several projects with good results.

Right above the shower doors, we dropped a soffit partition, making the room — now 16 feet long — appear 3 feet shorter than it really is. We left the ceiling over the entry vestibule at its original height, so that it could serve as a transition between the low-ceilinged hallway and the much taller main bathroom.

Final Details

Despite its cathedral ceiling, the central area still felt narrow, so we expanded it visually by positioning the vanity and a large framed mirror directly across from the existing window. The mirror helps anyone using the sink feel more connected to the outdoors and maximizes natural light.

To control costs, we reused the original oak vanity cabinet, but we tore out the one-piece plastic counter-and-lav unit. We installed a custom-made mahogany countertop and backsplash, then mounted the top of a pedestal sink (all of the new bathroom's fixtures are Kohler models). This lav's 34-inch height is much more comfortable for an adult to use than the original sink's 30 inches.

Finally, we trimmed the room with beadboard wainscot; painted both it and the vanity cabinet white; and laid new wide-plank pine flooring that matches the rest of the home's floors. We face-nailed the planks using hand-cut nails, then finished them with tung oil to enhance that old-house feel.



At one end of the room, a low-ceilinged entry vestibule serves as a transitional area between the bath and hallway.

Joe Cracco is a builder in Cumberland, R.I.