



Limestone tile, a zebra wood vanity (actually a kitchen cabinet, adapted for this purpose), and other rich finishes add up to a luxurious new look (left). A pocket door has replaced the old door, which opened inward and made the small space even more cramped.

Flight of Fancy

A hands-on homeowner turns a boring bathroom into something that really soars

BY KARIN HORGAN SULLIVAN /// PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIC HAUSMAN

If flight attendant Donna Birch ever decides to jettison her current career, she'd no doubt have a future as an interior designer. A year ago we featured her sleek, self-designed kitchen on our pages, and now she's back, this time with an overhaul of the bathroom in her Lincoln Park condo.

Inspired by magazine and catalog pictures as well as by visits to showrooms and trade shows, Birch is obsessive when it comes to designing her projects. She spent months scouring the Chicago area for just the right vanity, tile, fixtures, and lighting, and her patience paid off.

Birch started off looking for ceramic tile because her research, much of it done on the home improvement forums of johnbridge.com and gardenweb.com, had shown that natu-

ral stone tiles are susceptible to moisture stains and require special cleaning potions. "For months I went to every ceramic place in Illinois, but I couldn't find tile I liked," Birch says. So she followed her heart and went with one-foot-square limestone tiles, despite the babying they demand. "I love the color, I love the look," she explains. "I decorate very masculine, and I wanted something earthy."

Birch was meticulous when it came to deciding where to place each tile. She experimented with juxtapositions, moving the pieces around on the floor like a giant puzzle until she was happy with how the natural variations in color worked together. Then she numbered each tile and drew a map of where every single piece was to go; white-streaked tiles ended up on the wall near the white sink and toilet, while less interesting pieces disappeared behind the mirror.

Birch had planned to tile just the shower, floor, and part of the wall facing the toilet. But a kitchen and bath designer from Accento Italia, where she bought her vanity, had other ideas. "He said, 'It'll look like you didn't have enough money to finish it,'" Birch recalls. He suggested she take the stone tile all the way up two walls and leave the other two blank, so that's what she did, creating a dramatic backdrop for the entire space.



At the suggestion of Bartlett Shower Door owner John Klemptner, Birch chose a glass panel that pivots open for easy access to the tub (above). Shower and sink fixtures from Hydrology keep the square-cornered look going (right, top and bottom).

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Birch chose a zebrawood vanity, saving money by adapting a kitchen cabinet to the bath. Opting for a four-inch-high toe kick, rather than the usual six inches, lowered the cabinet to an appropriate height; recessing it two inches into the wall gave her extra storage but took up no more floor space than a vanity. Clever placement of an outlet inside the cabinet keeps the walls clean and uninterrupted.

One of the most striking aspects of the bathroom is that nearly every element has straight lines, an aesthetic that took endless amounts of shopping, both in stores and online, to achieve. When told she'd never find a sink with a square pop-up drain, Birch says, “I didn't take no for an answer.” In fact, her favorite part of the remodel is the sink,

a shallow, matte-white rectangle that she found at Hydrology; not only does it have a square drain and faucet but there's a rectangular overflow, as well. The crisp lines continue in the tub area, where a glass panel eliminates the need for a shower curtain.

Birch willingly accepts credit for designing a beautiful bathroom but is quick to add that she never could have achieved her vision without her contractor, Octavian Big, and his installer and brother-in-law, Danny Big, both of OCT Construction. “People pick beautiful finishes and then they have a terrible installer. All their beauty is gone because the tiles aren't even and things aren't centered,” she points out. “The three of us—that's how come it worked.”

For resource information, see page 112.