Generally it is the first thing you see in the morning and the last thing you see at night — your bathroom. If this room is not inspiring you to embrace your day with vigor, it may well be time for an update. Whether you simply need a low-maintenance space for general hygiene or you crave a spa-like retreat, there are plenty of options for consideration. Start your journey with the following four basic design principles then move on to specific material selections.

First, review the space or footprint of your bathroom. If the room provides all your basic necessities, then focus on updating the fixtures and finishes. However, if the space does not afford you the amenities you desire, such as storage, counter space, etc., then investigate reconfiguring or expanding it by incorporating space from an adjoining closet, bedroom or other contiguous room. One thing to keep in mind: In order to keep costs down, try to leave all plumbing fixtures in their original locations to minimizing re-piping for supply lines, waste lines and vent pipes.

Second, the great resale debate. Many homeowners worry about the resale value of their home when they are considering a renovation. As a general rule of thumb, if you plan on staying in your home for five years or more, then choose a design and materials that suit you, as it is likely that after five years, the
next occupants will want to put their own mark on the space with the next generation of fixtures and finishes.

Along these same lines, there is “the great bathtub debate.” Most homeowners find that their busy lives do not afford them time for a long soak in the tub; they would appreciate a spacious shower but they hesitate to remove the tub in favor of a larger shower. Contractors and bathroom designers say that over the course of the last several years, they have removed more tubs in favor of larger showers than they have installed — and that this trend will likely continue.

Third, in an effort to get the best return on your bathroom remodel investment, consider features that will accommodate your changing needs as you age, allowing you to live in your home in safety and comfort (and more cost-
effectively than in assisted care) for as long as you choose. For example, include grab bars in the shower/bath area (or at the very least, wall blocking for future installation), comfort height toilets, single-lever faucets, zero-threshold showers with hand-held shower heads, built-in shower seats and walk-in baths. There are a myriad of beautiful options for these items that don’t look the least bit institutional.

Lastly, one person’s bling is another’s necessity. Bathroom bling can be defined in many ways, whether it be a mirror with an embedded television screen to keep you up to date on the day’s news, an ornate chandelier over the bathtub, a steam shower system controlled by an iPad or a medicine cabinet that has a chilled compartment for perishable personal care products. Whatever strikes your fancy, there is no shortage of luxury options for today’s bathroom. Take solace in the fact that luxury does not have to be wasteful. If you compare the energy and water usage of a steam shower to that of a 6-foot jetted bathtub, the steam shower is much the miser. A heated towel bar can serve more than one purpose — you can hang a towel on it for luxurious warmth and provide energy-efficient supplementary heat to a room that may be a long duct run from the furnace.

Product Trends

**Bathtubs:** Free-standing soaking tubs, properly sized for the homeowner, are very popular these days, supplanting the oversized, water-heater-draining, noisy,
built-in jet tubs of yesteryear. These tubs can be traditional or modern and may be complemented by sculptural, floor-mounted or wall-mounted tub fillers.

**Showers and shower heads:** Bigger sometimes is better, as evidenced by today’s showers trending up in size and amenities. Multiple shower heads, built-in seats, beautiful tile work, steam functionality, frameless and doorless shower glass and more can be found in many homes today.

Who knew a shower drain cover could be so beautiful? Decorative and seamless drains augment a stylish bathroom design. Shower heads come in so many configurations and finishes that when selecting a head, you feel much like you do at the ice cream parlor trying to pick an ice cream flavor. From chrome to oil-rubbed bronze finishes, from fixed to the wall to fixed to the ceiling, from hand-held on a hook to hand-held on a slide bar, there is a right shower head for everyone. Having both a fixed and a hand-held shower head in the same shower gives you the best of both worlds — spot showering, hands-free showering and easy cleaning.

**Sinks and faucets:** Undermounted sinks are the most popular for bathrooms that get everyday use while vessel sinks are a popular style for eclectic powder
rooms. Two sinks or one? For true comfort, you need at least 60 inches of vanity width with sinks that are no wider than 17 inches to accommodate two sinks. Two sinks can minimize sibling squabbles in a shared bathroom and increase efficiency for working couples who rise at the same hour; however, two sinks typically means less usable storage in the bathroom so weigh the benefits when selecting.

Toilets and washlets: Utilitarian or luxurious, the biggest trends in toilets are skirted bases (who wants to clean around the nooks and crannies?), wall hung (smaller footprint, ease of maneuvering around and just plain stylish) and HETs (high-efficiency toilets that use 1.28 gallons per flush or less). From contemporary to traditional, there is a wide range of toilets available to match everyone’s taste and needs. For even more family harmony, don’t forget the soft-close toilet seat — no more startling bangs in the middle of the night!

Washlets are effectively a toilet seat that performs like a bidet but better. Spendy as they are (prices start around $700 and go up depending on whether you are purchasing just the seat or a whole toilet package), they are not just a nice luxury; they are a means of preserving the safety and dignity of individuals who lack the dexterity to service themselves when using the toilet. Washlet features include heated seats, heated washer and heated air drying.

Cabinets and countertops: From alder to zebrano, today’s bathroom
cabinets come in all wood species and door styles. Current trends are soft-close doors and drawers, convenience hardware such as built-in laundry hampers and built-in grooming stations, as well as mirrors and medicine cabinets built to match the cabinetry. As with cabinetry, countertop options run a wide gamut, from the value priced laminate to the fully custom concrete.

To ensure long life, it is important to select your countertop material based on your lifestyle and grooming habits. For those individuals who use alcohol-based personal-care products such as perfume, cologne, hair spray or hair gels, it would be best to choose a laminate, solid surface or engineered-stone countertop and to avoid quarried-stone countertops, as these personal care products can damage the stone’s sealant.
Lighting and mirrors: Bathrooms are best lit with a variety of lights. For example, it is nice to have a recessed can light directly over the shower or shower/tub unit to illuminate activities such as shaving or reading (it is even better if you select a combination can light/exhaust fan unit such as those offered by Broan Nutone, Panasonic or Fan Tech). It is advisable to have a can light over the sink, with wall sconces on the wall behind the sink space slightly more than sink-width apart. Consider incorporating a dimmer for both mood lighting and night lighting around the tub and water closet.

Decorative and functional hardware: Decorative and functional hardware provide a true customized look and functionality to a bathroom. From blingy cabinet pulls to pullout cabinets and wall-mounted brackets designed to securely store your hair dryer, there is a myriad of choices. Many manufacturers offer decorative hardware “families,” allowing you to coordinate your towel bars, robe hooks and toilet paper dispenser with your sink faucet and shower head.

Flooring: Choosing a flooring material for your bathroom will likely be the easiest decision of all because many flooring materials are not appropriate for this wet environment. Electric radiant heat is a popular feature in today’s bathroom and the most compatible flooring material with in-floor heat is tile. Porcelain tends to be the most cost-effective, durable and low-maintenance tile for flooring but other tiles can be used, bearing in mind that you need to factor in the slipping potential from a glazed tile surface. Linoleum is a good choice when in-floor heat is not desired and you want to keep your door thresholds low. Vinyl is a low-cost option but not nearly as durable or environmentally friendly as other flooring options.

Remodeling your bathroom can be an enjoyable experience, provided you take adequate time to plan the project and enlist professional help for those aspects that you do not have the requisite vision or expertise to handle. To minimize frustration and avoid falling in love with items that don’t fit in your budget, set your project budget before you head out to showrooms or start your internet search. Develop a style for the room by perusing through books, magazines and online to get ideas for colors, fixtures and finishes that appeal to you and are befitting to your home. Set a realistic timeframe for completing your project by avoiding hemming yourself into events like a family reunion or the holidays. Once you have covered these preliminary bases, you will be ready to start your project.

Note: In order to meet the National Electrical Code, a chandelier hung over a bathtub must be no less than 8 feet above the rim of the tub (bottom edge of chandelier to top edge of bathtub).