



Caught in a Niche – Tips on Installing Accessory Items

One of the key elements in designing a shower or bath area is determining the type and placement of the accessories: soap dishes, towel bars, grab bars, benches, etc. Functionality, design, cost, and installation issues are some of the factors in determining which unit(s) will be appropriate for the installation. There are some interesting aspects to the process from start to finish that are the basis for this report.

Most likely the placement of the accessories, even if they were installed by a previous owner, isn't an issue unless a problem or annoyance arises. A typical example is the nearly dissolved soap awaiting you in the shower the next day because the bar of soap became saturated in the water which failed to drain from the dish. Or, another example is when you are looking for a place to hang items to dry and you realize there's nothing inside the shower or bath area to hang things on. A more serious example is in the case where you come close to slipping and your first reaction is to grab for something that's not there or there's only a soap dish or niche which may or may not be adequate to support you or break your fall.

Don't Grab the Soap

For safety reasons many manufacturers have shied away from designing soap dishes with the built-in washcloth bar. It's not the inherent lack of strength of the ceramic itself but in how it's installed. The soap dish

is typically not installed in a manner intended to support the force/weight of a falling person and yet this is commonly the first thing a falling individual would reach for. The soap dish is usually 'just' bonded to the substrate and not tied in to the wall studs. Safety bars on the other hand are designed for this purpose and they are installed specifically to hold weight. This may be done by anchoring the bar to the wood studs or to wood blocking installed for this purpose. Many times there is no safety bar installed in a shower until the need arises, however, this could be an element to consider installing when the shower is first designed. It is always a handy addition even when we, as healthy young or strong individuals, don't see it as essential.

Follow All Directions

Once the accessory items and their locations have been selected there are also elements to consider when installing them. Following the accessory and setting materials manufacturers' instructions is the best bet in any installation. In some instances, the general instructions for the accessory item may not apply to all areas. For example, the instructions may indicate that it's ok to use mastic or plaster of Paris to install the item, which is true, but not in a shower (wet area). Or a quick glance at the instructions on a niche may indicate the need to level the item (from left to right) but further reading shows that the niche has a predetermined slope on the bottom surface which is not intended to be level (from front to back). Much of this may be obvious to an experienced tile setter but not necessarily to the DIY (Do-it-Yourselfer).

Manufacturers have developed an enormous selection of items which offer decorative and technical benefits. Prefabricated niches come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes, and compositions



Right: Bathroom accessories can add functionality and a decorative element. Photo courtesy of Ceramic Tile Education Foundation.

from polystyrenes to corrosion resistant aluminum alloys. Some are treated with anti-fracture and/or waterproofing membranes as well. The primary concerns are to avoid build-up of moisture in the wall cavity and to resist deterioration and corrosion of the niche unit itself or the wall around it. Many are also fabricated in ways which directly aid in the subse-

quent application of the tile with textured surfaces and thin flanges, etc.

This Old House

In cases where the house may be older or the stud spacing doesn't accommodate a prefabricated niche dimension, one can always fabricate an in-wall niche by hand using backerboard materials. A cross-mem-

ber between the studs may be necessary in this case and in the case of some pre-fabricated niches as well. This provides the necessary support for the unit. For some types of niches, in-wall blocking is not indicated.

Ceramic accessories which may be directly bonded to existing tile surfaces, clipped-on, or which get bonded to the tile substrate offer lots of flexibility in this respect.

Stick to it

One last item is caulk. When installing any of these items: pre-fabricated niches, hand-made in-wall niches, traditional ceramic accessories, etc., caulk is an essential. The manufacturer's instructions will usually indicate the type of caulk needed and how and where it should be applied. In order to help ensure a long-lasting corrosion and deterioration free installation, following the directions with respect to applying the caulk, etc. is your best bet.

Silicone caulk may be used to apply flat-backed accessories to existing tile installations. Again, this method offers flexibility and the accessory items can be easily removed from the tile if a change is desired. In addition, this face-mounted technique maintains the integrity of any waterproofing. Acid-cure caulks can be used behind the accessories where there is limited air exposure. These products will cure in confined spaces.

And lastly, caulk will help protect against deterioration or corrosion when you are forced to drill into an existing installation in order to hang the accessories. Silicone caulk can be used to fill the holes prior to putting in the fasteners and applied on top of the screws once they are tightened.

Where, What, How?

There are many information sources on accessories or niches at your tile distributor, on-line, and through the manufacturers, etc. Technical Bulletin #8 published by Materials and Methods Standards Association (MMSA) is available on their website, www.mmsa.ws. This bulletin specifically covers some step-by-step pointers on installing accessories. In addition, the Tile Council of North America has a list on their website, www.tileusa.com, of member manufacturers with links to their websites. **TILE**

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