

INTERIORS GOOD ENOUGH TO FRAME

# ELLE DECOR

MARCH 2021

**HOT HOUSE!**  
6 NEW FABRICS YOU'LL  
WANT TO LIVE IN

**STILL LIFE WITH  
FRYING PANS**  
HOW TO MAKE  
A MASTERPIECE  
KITCHEN

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of a Furniture  
Inheritance

The Art Issue  
**CREATIVES  
COLLECTORS &  
CONNOISSEURS  
AT HOME**



INSPIRATION FOR YOUR RENOVATION

# BUILDER

TOOLBOX

## Out of Sight, Top of Mind

The modern powder room reflects years of human ingenuity and imagination—and a determination to design our way through our collective anxieties.

BY KELSEY KEITH

Calico Wallpaper's  
Moors in a Dallas  
powder room by  
Jean Liu Design.





A Richard Mishaan designed powder room finds its light in gold accents and jewel tones. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A mural by the artist Shantell Martin steals the show in a half bath by Ernest de la Torre.

**W**HILE EVERY BIT OF OUR HOMES HAS GOTTEN more usage during the past year in quarantine, never before have our humble sinks seemed quite so ho-hum. Even brass swan taps lovingly sourced from estate sales inevitably bear the brunt of so much handwashing—and hand-wringing. Woe, indeed, is the washbasin.

But the hygienic realities of the half bath have historically been tempered, at least with euphemisms if not with a decorative flair that belies the room's intended usage. (Did we mention the brass swan taps?) Our current chapter in domestic hygiene, blighted as it is by COVID-19, arrives in the wake of two centuries of engineering innovation alongside evolving social mores—the advent of indoor plumbing; a lavatory for guests' use—while what we commonly call “powder rooms” came to prominence even earlier.

Originating in noble courts as a dedicated space for freshening wigs—“with live birds and tons of powder,” as historian R. Grant Gilmore III describes them—powder rooms eventually “trickled down into society. The Industrial ▷



## Pardon Me

A look at the small-but-mighty powder room's historical design import.

### American Politesse

A 1939 powder room in California (right) was designed to reflect the Victorian social mores that necessitated a specific space for “freshening up.” Writer and researcher Suzanne Spellman notes that often these spaces had “no bathroom facilities” to speak of, and fixtures had to be retrofitted into the room as indoor plumbing allowed.



### French Practicality

Historian Barbara Penner connects ritual cleansing to Le Corbusier's infamous addition to his hallmark Villa Savoye (right): a traditional, free-standing pedestal sink in an open floor plan, off the chauffeur's entrance to the house from the garage. “You never see it photographed with anything as everyday as soap or a hand towel,” Penner says. “It's a statement about the importance of hygiene to the modern movement.”





Revolution created the middle class—and rooms were a way to show status and wealth.”

The half bath, the powder room’s more genial, practical cousin, took a similar path from rarity to routine. Wallpaper, with roots tracing back to ancient China, had become accessible elsewhere by the mid-19th century, thanks to a combination of industrial advancements. Manufacturers made a point to advertise that their paper patterns could obscure dirt, and worse. By the turn of the century, Victorians were fluent enough in hygienics to prefer more sanitary surfaces in a bathroom, hence the popularity of white tile.

Today, the powder room remains a space that lends itself to bold design gestures. A maximalist approach makes the most of such a small footprint; even decorators on a budget tend to specify more luxurious materials, given that there’s a limited amount of square footage to clad in marble—or mirror, or horsehair.

Tamsin Johnson, an interior designer based in Paddington, Australia, notes that: “You don’t need to worry about the practical concerns of exhaust, steam, and splashes as much, so it’s the perfect place to experiment” with materials. Designer David Kaihoi of Redd Kaihoi similarly embraces that spirit of experimentation, advising homeowners to play up the room’s petite dimensions and unique qualities. “Put your best art in your powder room!” he says. “It’s intimate—you can get up close.”

A well-executed powder room can be both show pony and workhorse: Even the most outré designers are pragmatists where it counts, particularly in an era defined by virus-particle avoidance. In addition to status hand soap from the likes of Byredo or Aesop, hand sanitizer has become a powder-room staple. “Now that people are buying it in bulk,” designer Young Huh points out, “consider putting it in an attractive marble soap dispenser.” ■

## Primp & Circumstance

Bold prints and sculptural fixtures make the humble powder room a decorative heavy hitter.

BY LAUREL J. BENEDUM



1.

### Whiskey Stripe Wallpaper

This playful pattern (named for the designer’s dog) is a welcome twist on traditional stripes.

To the trade.  
ferrickmason.com

2.

### Kintsu Faucet

This faucet makes a design element of clean lines and broken geometries, channeling Scandinavian and Japanese motifs.

\$770. brizo.com

3.

### Elm Basin

The pinstripe detail and eye-catching color of this concrete sink add whimsy to a classic basin silhouette.

23.5" w. x 14" d. x 18" h.,  
\$3,765.  
kastconcretebasins.com

4.

### Rhea Washstand

Black and white have never looked chicer than on this mixed-marble washstand inspired by Japanese architecture.

35" w. x 24" d. x 42" h.,  
\$15,500. waterworks.com

5.

### Bamboo Sconce

This stunning sconce is a work of art for the walls, crafted from a single onyx block and finished with hand-carved cast bronze.

Price upon request.  
achillesalvagni.com