



To minimize potential water-leak damage and simplify future projects, the author designs for access whenever possible (1, 2). All the mechanicals that service a remodeled second-story bathroom can be reached from a first-floor half-bath by pushing up on a ceiling tile or by pulling back on the soffit board, which rests on trim attached to the wall and is held in place with removable screws along the outside edge (3).

## Hidden Bathroom Access Panels

BY TOM O'BRIEN

**I hate it when I have to smash** through a finished surface in order to deal with a leaky pipe or some other mechanical issue. Whenever it's in my power to install an access panel in a place where such an occurrence is possible, I do so. In most cases, a manufactured panel, drop ceiling, or simple sheet of plywood fits the bill. But when the affected wall or ceiling happens to be in a highly visible location (and the budget permits), I prefer to disguise the means of access. A recent bathroom remodel on the second story of a Victorian-era home provided just such an opportunity.

**Slide-out soffit.** Before the plumbers could rough-in for new fixtures, I first had to remove the plaster ceiling of the half-bath directly underneath the upstairs bath. After the plumbers and the electrician had finished up their work and moved on, I framed a soffit to enclose the drains and began work on the cover-up (1).

Instead of using drywall, I wrapped the soffit with 1/4-inch AC plywood. The face board is securely fastened with finish nails. The bottom panel, however, rests on a narrow ribbon of trim at the wall-to-ceiling joint on all sides except for the front edge, which is held up by five evenly-spaced countersunk screws; when someone needs access, they can simply back out the screws and slide the plywood out like a drawer.

**Paneled ceiling.** Had all of the fixtures for the upstairs bathroom been lined up along the same wall, the removable soffit panel would have provided enough access from below. But this project featured a tub/shower on the other side of the room and a radiator along the back wall. So I crafted a wooden version of a suspended ceiling using 6/4 pine for the perimeter and 3/4-inch furring strips to fashion a six-panel grid (2).

The two panels in the center are actually a single sheet of 1/2-inch AC plywood, which provides rigidity for the ceiling and support for the light fixture. That sheet is solidly fixed in place: It's fastened to the grid with screws driven from above and supported by tie wire connected to the joists. The remaining panels are 1/4-inch AC plywood, cut

Photos by Tom O'Brien



to overlap the grid about 1/2 inch on all sides, and reliant on gravity to stay in place (3).

**Built-in shelves.** The footprint for the new main bedroom created a 6-foot-wide alcove for the bathtub. After some discussion, the owners decided to downsize the tub to 5 feet and use the space between the wet wall and bathroom wall (4) to recess a built-in shelf unit (5). This modification fulfilled their wish for storage and enabled me to hide another access panel (6). If the tub's plumbing ever needs service, the plumber can simply take away the adjustable shelves on the bottom half of the unit, back out five screws, and pull out the plywood that serves as the back panel for the bottom half of the bookshelf.

While I was in shelf-building mode, I noticed how easily the electrician was able to use the box I'd framed around the soil stack as a chase for his new circuits. To keep that option open for future projects, I made a simple, recessed medicine cabinet to fit between the studs (7). It's fastened to the framing with four flat-head screws driven through the casing, so it will be easy to pull out if the need arises.

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Downsizing the tub unit from 6 feet to 5 feet created room for a double wet wall, as indicated by the extra sole plate in the alcove rough framing (4). This double wall construction makes space available to recess a built-in shelf unit into the outside wall and easily access the plumbing if necessary (5, 6). Should an electrician need to run a new circuit from basement to attic, access to the chase can be had by backing out four screws and removing the narrow medicine cabinet at right (7).