

Case Study 1

Chenery House San Francisco, California, USA

Since it's founding in 1992, Mark English Architects has designed numerous residential and small commercial spaces throughout California, Texas and in Mexico. The firm has a special interest in building in the urban context, with half of its work occurring in San Francisco. This project consists of a complete reorganization of the master bedroom and bathroom in an existing four-storey single-family home in San Francisco. A small space originally allotted to the master bath was maintained for the toilet and bidet, while the shower and vanity functions were extended along an entire wall of the existing master bedroom.

Mark English Principal Architect Mark English Architects

The project was a referral given by a former residential client in the neighborhood. Our client is an accomplished scientist and business woman with contemporary taste and an ability to think formally in three-dimensions. Our initial meeting was graced with a series of 'parti' drawings, made by the client, implying both massing and geometric intent.

A glimpse about the house and it's decor made clear the client's love of glass and it's physical characteristics of transparency, reflection, colouration and refraction. This love of glass, coupled with a biologist's love of the artifacts of growth, led the architects to choose a variety of glass tile, block and mirror, as well as natural timber as the predominant finishes.

The architects, Mark English and Maria Barmina, designed the bathroom using hand sketches and 3-D computer rendering models. The resultant overlapping arcing and orthogonal planes were virtually tested from the vantage point of the bed, with adjustments made to accentuate the theatrical layered quality.

The hands-on nature of both the architects and the owner meant that there would be no general contractor for this project. The master tile setter, cabinet maker and carpenter were all judged to be the best in field based on the work they had done on previous projects.

The resulting bathroom is about everything beyond function – the bathing experience as an integral part of the private world of the bedroom. As such, the client's original hopes were met and exceeded. Comfort, sensuality, theatre and beauty are expressed in the new space. The mutable characteristics of light playing in iridescent glass tiles and cast glass blocks, as well as in the water and wet surfaces,

inspire personal contemplation. The glass tile walls, cabinet faces and mirrors are arranged in space to create a sense of layering and lightness.

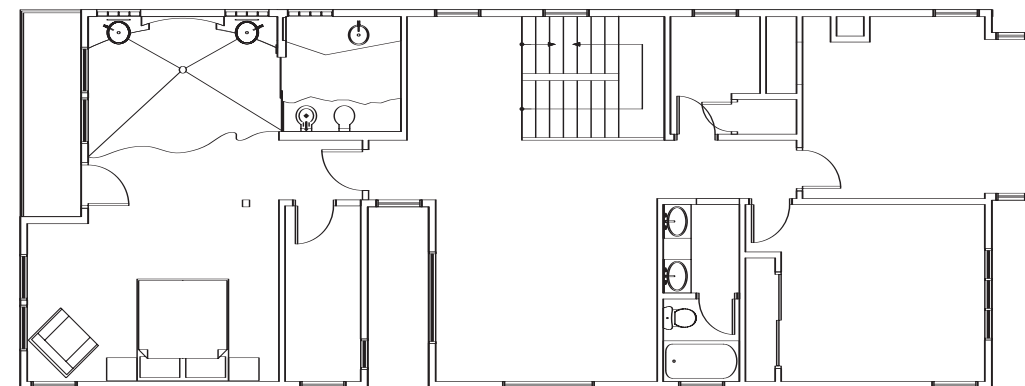
Custom fabricated mirrors are cantilevered from the ceiling to allow the glass block wall to remain complete. The curving oak cabinets are coated with a Becker Acroma Conversion Varnish finish to resist the effects of water. The colour of the veneer is in harmony with the Douglas Fir structural post and the drapery. The heated shower floor is a gently sloping plinth whose edge was determined by a thrown rope during layout. The toilet room wall-mounted fixtures float above a slab of salvaged Bay Laurel wood set into the tile floor.

Christopher 'Kit' Miller Contractor Amalfi Tile and Marble

I will never forget the first time I met with the client to look at Mark English's plans for her bathroom. They were elaborate, with curves and irregular transitions on most of the tiled elements. It took me longer than normal to process the scope of such an exceptional project.

A part of me was apprehensive that there were so many aberrant characteristics detailed for the bathroom, however the creative part of me was elated with the possibility of taking on such an endeavor. Right from the start, I began to realize the magnitude of effort this bathroom would entail.

Conventional shower pans are usually restricted to a particular area in the bathroom. This shower pan, though, encompassed the whole room including a curved wall and stepped curb. Shower pans need to comply with applicable building codes, and without protruding curbs, this can be very difficult. It



Above

The master bedroom and bathroom suite (left) has been completely reorganised. The original bathroom now contains only the WC, bidet and washbasin, while the main shower and vanity area has moved out into the bedroom space where it occupies the far wall opposite the bed.

Left

View of the shower platform and one of the vanity consoles. The WC and bidet are housed behind sliding etched glass doors. The floor of the shower, a sheet of glass mosaic tiles, slopes gently back towards the wall to ensure that water falls away from the carpeted bedroom floor.

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requires precise calculations for proper slopes and drain height in relation to the entrance of shower area. The outline for the curb was designed by the client and a template was used to fabricate this outline in metal. I used this form to recreate the flowing curves in mortar. I also installed embedded electric radiant heating in the shower pan. I normally install these systems with mosaic floors but never in a shower pan.

I spoke with different vendor's technicians to be sure to use the proper products to get the optimal results without compromising the shower pan liner. The actual setting of the tile entailed never-ending intricacies. I have worked with all kinds of glass mosaic tiles before, normally in areas that are flat and square. This bathroom, having many arcs and bends, was much more difficult. It meant cutting tiny glass tiles individually at different angles and sizes for every field of tile. I could not use conventional levels properly and relied on a laser level.

The visual properties of the tile's iridescence were like none I have seen before. As I installed the tile it seemed as if it had come to life. It shimmered brilliantly and would change when the surroundings did. Any type of light and reflection would bring about the tile's radiance. The curved walls and angles magnified its scintillating attributes. I would catch myself just staring at the tiled areas, bedazzled.

This iridescence also made the tiles tricky to install. A tile seemingly placed perfectly in the morning would show slight imperfections in the afternoon or twilight, and so on. What's more, looking at different angles would reveal otherwise undetected blemishes. Each region of tile needed to be checked at different angles throughout the day.

Physically, the little pieces of glass were much more forgiving. It was very easy to make even very small cuts without chipping or cracking. The cut edges were almost effortless to polish,

enabling me to smooth even installed tile.

Most bathroom vanity tops I have tiled are square with either top or under-mounted sink bowls. These tops boasted translucent glass bowls placed as if floating out of the curved vanity. Floating mortar and setting tiles around these circular projections proved to be a complex task. It required plenty of forethought, templates and countless readjustments. The design required incorporating a finished piece of Bay Laurel wood with its natural bark edge raised off the floor – an atypical detail involving carefully floating mortar to the irregular edge of the wood without harming it. The effect it created was as if the wood was floating in the field of tile.

My owner of the house is a dream client who was always positive and appreciative of the work I was doing. Her technical comprehension was amazing. I could talk to her about tile specific processes in detail. It was invaluable working with a home owner who could understand and be involved on a technical level.

Mark is an outstanding architect with innovative ideas. I respect his adeptness in working with all the professions to create coherent architecture. Without my client's imagination and Mark's ingenuity the incredible vision would never have been transformed into reality. I feel very fortunate that I was included in the creation of a functional work of art. It was one of the most rewarding projects I have had the pleasure of working on.

Eve Chenery
Client

The 'bathroom remodel', that my project was very simply described as, was, in truth, a complex operation to replace a malformed and mindless central core of a structure with a new spirit and a new centre. The space was to be

transformed completely to remove the mute space at end of a passage. The mission, therefore, was to no longer tolerate dull and deadened senses at the core of the house's personal space.

I intended to transform the area by creating visual planes that were satisfying from the central vantage point of the room – a platform bed in the master bedroom. Always intriguing to me was the deliberate placement and juxtaposition of materials in ways that create a sense of calm and unity. A curve with a large radius, materials that seem to bend to the will of the senses rather than follow the expected straight cut of a saw.

I revel in the properties of light and water as they transform the appearance of glass, and so I wished to see many thousands of glass mosaic tiles to blend on large surfaces so they themselves become the canvas for light to form unexpected visual spectacles.

This display is muted by the unorthodox placement of wood – an old and very beautiful chunk of bay laurel was embedded into a floor of glass. The beautiful new bathing environment evoked in me a simple sense of calm and a pure sense of concentration and meditation. In delivering this new bathroom, Mark English Architects knew, listened, translated and understood, and never lost sight of the goal.



Left

In the WC, the wall mounted fixtures float above a piece of salvaged Bay Laurel timber set into the glass mosaic floor. The effect is of a wave washing on a sandy shore.

Below

View from the bed where the glamour of this unique bathroom is apparent. The organic curves of the step to the shower platform were created by throwing a rope across the floor which was then translated into a steel template.

