



# The Stay-at-Home Spa

Splurging on an exuberant master bath was a lifestyle choice for a busy professional couple **BY ROB BRENNAN**

If you were from Finland, you might use *sauna* as a verb. Apparently, there is a scientific technique to using these cedar-clad hot rooms to promote health and vitality. The process involves showering, heating up slowly, cooling down quickly, and drinking plenty of water. Tom and Denise Genuit are busy parents, professionals, and snowboarders who learned how

to take a traditional sauna from their European neighbors. When they called my firm to talk about some remodeling work, they already knew that someday, they wanted a master bath where they could retreat from the stress of their careers as a doctor and a nurse. They knew it would include a sauna. What we ended up designing was a master bath that offers a full spa experience with a

direct connection to the garden terrace and hot tub a story below.

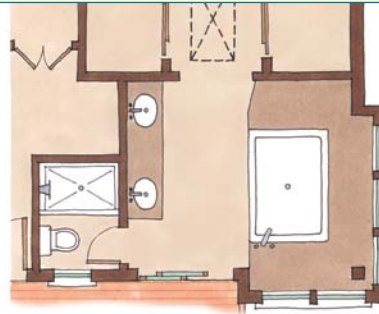
## The master retreat

This remodel actually began as a landscape project. Tom and Denise wanted to improve their private backyard by tearing off an existing deck and replacing it with a patio. They also knew, however, that they wanted



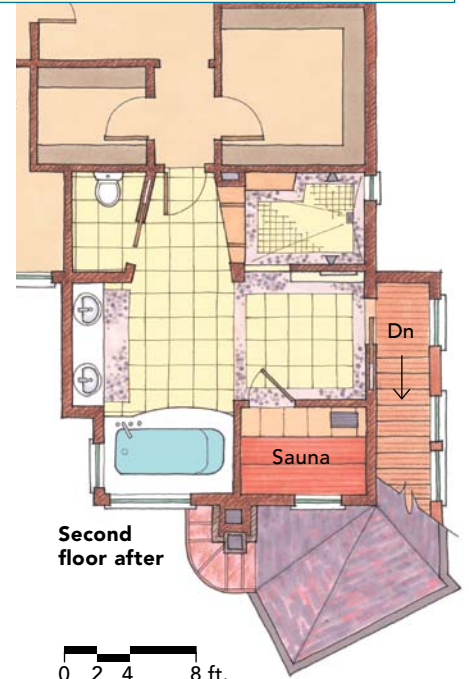
## FROM GOOD TO GREAT

While their original master bath did not want for space, these homeowners wanted a full, spalike retreat from their stressful professional lives. Four distinct areas orbit the spacious circulation area: the vanity, the tub, the sauna, and the shower.



**Second floor before**

**Sunlight falls on a sustainable material palette.** Recycled IceStone counters sit atop a bamboo vanity and tub surround. A wavy backsplash from 3form is made from a polyester resin and is GreenGuard-certified to promote healthful indoor-air quality. The sauna kit from SaunaFin was a DIY project for the homeowners and their son.



**Second floor after**



**Light and function in a lavish shower.** The walk-in shower has a window and hardworking walls. Teak shelves are used for storage and display. A bench and a towel warmer add function and comfort. A frosted-glass door to the stairwell offers light and privacy.

to connect the interior of their home with the landscape in a more meaningful way. When they started talking to their landscaper about adding a porch or sunroom, he referred them to us.

Very quickly, we came to the conclusion that now was the time to remodel their second-floor master bath, which was not particularly small, but was dated. What they

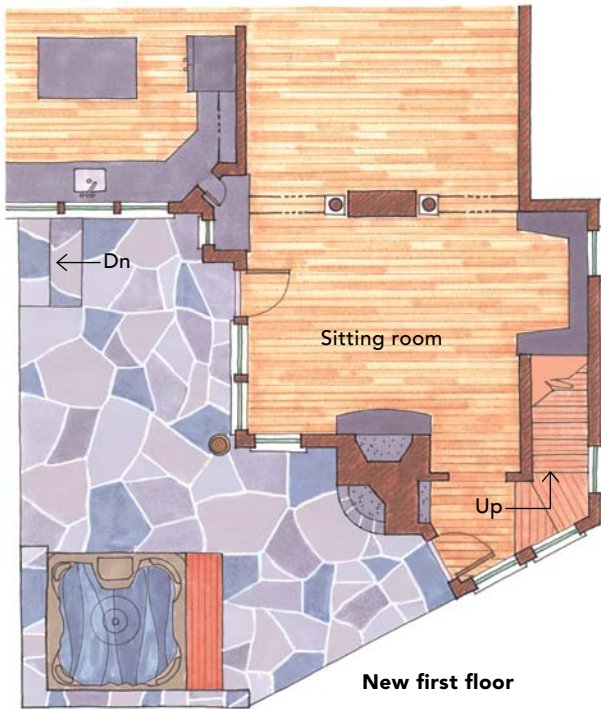
really wanted was not so much a new master bath, but more of a master retreat: a sunlit spa with separate shower and tub, a water closet, a double vanity, a sauna, and a real connection to the backyard.

An addition was in order. In this case, a second-floor addition meant a first-floor addition, so we designed a sitting room below the master bath with a fireplace and



## BEYOND THE BATH

This master-bath remodel included a new space on the first floor and a new landscape design. The homeowners' desire to have the hot tub be part of the bathroom experience meant creating a direct path from the indoor bathroom to the patio outside.



**A special space to sit.** The lower level of the addition is another sanctuary for the homeowners. The away room has a cozy fireplace, a sleek wall-hung TV cabinet, and some simple bookcases. Like the bathroom, the sitting room is lush with sunlight.



**The indoor connection.**

*The materials used outside the addition reflect the bath, including the cedar siding that mimics the sauna walls, and the stone patio and chimney that reflect the river-rock floor-tile accents inside.*

a bank of windows that look onto the new patio. We also included a stairway from the bathroom to the patio, which was one of the more challenging aspects of the design.

We initially considered an outdoor stair. Because the clients wanted year-round access to the backyard hot tub, though, we decided that exterior stairs could be dangerous. We settled on a closed stair with lots of awning windows for a visual connection with the exterior and to allow fresh air into the transitional space. An additional benefit of the stair is that guests can use the master retreat without going through the bedroom.

**Inside-out materials**

When it came to choosing materials for Tom and Denise's bath, we drew spiritual inspiration from the baths at Peter Zumthor's Vals Spa in Switzerland. These baths are timeless in quality and materials. We wanted to bring that same natural quality to this project: the immutability of stone, the warmth of cedar, the freshness of bamboo.

With plenty of sunlight from windows on all three of the bathroom's exterior walls, even in the shower and sauna, we were able to extend the ephemeral quality of light reflecting on these materials through the whole day. We wanted to bring more than just sunlight in from outside, because this was an outdoor project as well. We also wanted to use some modern, sustainable, and playful materials.

The river-stone tile border mimics the stonework of the chimney and retaining wall, and comforts Tom and Denise's feet as they stand at the vanity. Knowing that the bath would have a cedar-clad sauna, we used cedar as an exterior accent for siding the stairwell and bump-out. The IceStone glass and mother-of-pearl counters, serpentine 3form Varia Ecoresin backsplash, bamboo vanity, and tub and sauna surrounds add a modern touch with sustainable sensibilities. The teak shower shelves are traditional and durable.

Tom and Denise decided to install the sauna themselves. We specified a curb, a rubber-membrane floor, a blueboard wall, and an exhaust fan for ventilation, and they ordered a kit from SaunaFin. Tom had a great experience assembling the kit with his son and has high praise for the customer service at SaunaFin.

**Reflecting a trend**

Although Tom and Denise still have one child at home, this project aligns with a remodeling trend that we have been noticing: empty-nesters and midcareer homeowners looking to personalize their colonials, ranches, and bungalows for their current lifestyle as well as life changes on the horizon. It's not uncommon to hear homeowners say things like, "Yeah, the whirlpool tub is nice, but honestly, we never use it." Tom and Denise use every bit of their new bathroom, year-round. It seems remodeling with lifestyle—not resale—in mind was the right thing for them to do. □

Rob Brennan, AIA, is the principal of Brennan + Company Architects (BrennanArch.com) in Ellicott City, Md. Photos by Anne Gummerson.