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Shower-Door

Sliding, swinging, or bifold,
we review your choices

BY MATTHEW TEAGUE



A sliding door for the modern bath. This shower door, made by Basco, represents the custom appeal of a factory-made door that has a relatively low price tag. The sleek frame, with an oil-rubbed bronze finish, holds 3/16-in.-thick glass. The door costs roughly \$550 (as shown).

More often than not, the shower door is the first thing you notice when you walk into a bathroom. Unfortunately, this first thing you see is most often the last thing considered in a bathroom's design. Choosing a shower door might not be the first design decision made, but its prominence within the space demands that it ought not be left for last. Whatever type of shower you have—a simple tub enclosure or an expansive tiled-in shower room—there are numerous ways to contain shower overspray, and it pays to explore all the options.

Ten years ago, the bulk of the market consisted of premade stock doors, many of them sliders. However, the market has shifted, and the attention on custom designs is greater than ever. Manufacturers have responded by creating efficient production methods,

SLIDING DOORS

Don't let memories of a rickety 1960s slider—which was prone to leaking, jamming, and jumping out of its tracks—scare you off. New models, like Basco's 3400 unit (photo left), not only work smoothly but also come in a wide range of styles with endless glass options. Units range from those with one fixed door and one sliding door to those with multiple sliding doors, which allow a wider entryway to the shower. While sliders are still used mostly on tub/shower combinations, newer models, like MTL's Teutonic (photo facing page), look great on stand-alone shower stalls.

Traditionally, sliders are framed units, but newer models come in sleek semiframeless designs. Sliders referred to as "frameless" typically describe only the panels; there has to be some kind of structure to hold the door in place. Most "frameless" sliders have top and side frames of some kind, even if they're minimal. Thicker and heavier glass requires more substantial framework. The top of the door is usually guided with rollers or bearings that are hidden seamlessly in the frame. The clunky lower tracks of old, which filled with water and soap scum over time, are no longer an issue. Lower tracks require only a small channel outfitted with a center guide to keep the panels moving on the correct plane.

Sampler

which demand a lead time as short as five days to make a custom-looking piece without the custom price tag. What this means for you is a greater selection of doors to choose from, but also a more complex decision-making process. Here, I'll save you some of the trouble and explore the most popular door options, their strengths, their weaknesses, general costs, and caveats.

Select an operating style that fits the bathroom layout

While sliding and swinging doors are the most common styles, bifold, curved, and neo-angle designs also have their place. Armed with the footprint of the shower and the height requirements, your first step is to figure out what type of operating style suits your bathroom best. In general, the larger the shower, the more enclosure options

you'll have. In small bathrooms, you'll be limited to doors that need little space when they're opened and closed.

Shower doors may vary, but materials don't

No matter what type of door you choose, you'll find that they're all constructed of similar materials. Shower doors and surrounds are made of some type of safety "glass"—plastic, glass, or a combination of the two. (See "What's the Difference?" p. 32.) Plastic is the least expensive "glass" option, but it comes at a cost. Plastic is easily scratched, and it tends to display wear and tear much more prominently than true glass.

Although there's no industry standard, shower doors range in thickness from $\frac{3}{16}$ in. up to $\frac{1}{2}$ in. Thick glass panels offer a more substantial look and evoke a greater sense of quality, especially in frameless designs. However,

Subtle, but suitable. In the past decade, shower doors with clear or slightly obscure glass have been homeowners' leading choice, representing about 95% of the market.

What to look for

Avoid doors with multiple grooves on the lower track. Although most tracks have weep holes, the potential for water collection exists if the holes are not at the lowest point of the track. Smooth surfaces where water runs directly back into the basin are best; they're easier to keep clean. Make sure the door you choose comes with or allows you to attach towel bars where you want them—outside the shower, inside the shower, or both.

Installation notes

The installation of most sliding units can be DIY as long as you've got enough helping hands to manage the weight of the door. Be sure to check the opening for square before you choose a unit, and make sure the framework can be adjusted easily in out-of-plumb situations. Tracks and frames that abut the walls or basin should be caulked with silicone on the outer side but left open on the inside so that water can weep back into the shower.

Starting around \$100



Roll on. The Teutonic by MTI, with its exposed barnlike rail and rollers, is nothing short of an architectural expression that turns a simple sliding door into a bathroom focal point. This shower door is outside the average price range for sliders and can cost several thousand dollars (\$3600 for a 60-in. unit).