Chicago Bathroom Remodeling Pros

Educational Resources for Chicago Homeowners
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Bathroom Flooring Buyer’s Guide

Everything You Need to Know Before Choosing Bathroom Flooring

Choosing bathroom flooring involves more than selecting a color or material you like. Bathroom floors must withstand moisture, humidity, daily traffic, cleaning, temperature changes, and the demands of a wet environment while also providing a safe, comfortable, and attractive surface.

The right flooring can complement the bathroom’s overall design, improve durability, simplify maintenance, and contribute to the room’s functionality. The wrong material or installation approach can create problems with moisture, slipping, staining, cracking, or premature deterioration.

Chicago homes can add another layer of complexity. Older homes may have uneven floors, outdated substrates, existing water damage, or structural conditions that need to be addressed before new flooring is installed. High-rise condominiums may also have building requirements affecting construction methods, materials, noise, waterproofing, and work procedures.

This buyer’s guide explains the major bathroom flooring options, what to consider before purchasing materials, and how to select flooring that works with your bathroom’s layout, design, construction conditions, and budget.

Start with a Good Plan

Before purchasing bathroom flooring, establish the overall design and determine how the floor will work with the shower, bathtub, vanity, toilet, walls, cabinetry, and other finishes.

Consider the bathroom’s size, existing floor condition, moisture exposure, desired appearance, maintenance requirements, accessibility needs, and budget. Planning these factors together helps prevent material selections that look attractive individually but do not work well within the finished bathroom.

Evaluate the Existing Floor

The existing floor should be evaluated before new flooring is selected or installed. The condition of the substrate can influence material choices, installation methods, project cost, and the overall feasibility of the renovation.

Look for uneven areas, damaged subflooring, loose materials, moisture damage, previous repairs, structural movement, and areas that may require additional preparation.

Older Chicago bathrooms may require more extensive preparation because decades of renovations, plumbing leaks, or previous flooring installations can leave underlying conditions that are not visible until the existing floor is removed.

Determine the Right Flooring Material

Bathroom flooring is available in numerous materials, ranging from practical porcelain tile to natural stone and specialty surfaces. Each option has different characteristics involving durability, maintenance, water resistance, appearance, cost, and installation.

The best choice depends on how the bathroom will be used and how the flooring fits into the overall design rather than simply selecting the most expensive material.

Choose Porcelain Tile

Porcelain tile is one of the most versatile bathroom flooring materials and is available in a wide range of colors, textures, patterns, sizes, and finishes.

It can replicate the appearance of marble, limestone, wood, concrete, or other materials while providing a durable surface suitable for bathroom environments.

Porcelain is especially useful when homeowners want design flexibility combined with relatively low maintenance.

Consider Ceramic Tile

Ceramic tile provides another practical flooring option and is available in numerous colors, patterns, shapes, and finishes.

While porcelain is generally denser and less water-absorbent, quality ceramic tile can work well in many bathroom applications when the appropriate product and installation method are selected.

Tile selection should consider the manufacturer’s specifications, intended application, surface characteristics, and installation requirements.

Consider Mosaic Tile

Mosaic tile can provide both visual interest and practical benefits in bathroom flooring. Smaller tile pieces create more grout joints, which can provide additional traction and allow the flooring to follow sloped surfaces more easily.

Mosaics are particularly useful for shower floors and smaller bathroom areas where drainage and floor contours need to be carefully coordinated.

Available patterns include squares, hexagons, penny rounds, rectangles, basketweaves, and other decorative configurations.

Consider Large-Format Tile

Large-format tile creates fewer grout joints and can produce a clean, contemporary appearance with greater visual continuity across the floor.

Large-format materials can work especially well in larger bathrooms, but they require careful substrate preparation because uneven floors can make installation more difficult.

Drainage and slope must also be considered when large-format tile is used in areas requiring a sloped floor.

Consider Natural Stone

Natural stone can create a distinctive, high-end bathroom floor with variations in color, texture, veining, and character.

Common choices include marble, limestone, travertine, slate, and granite. Natural stone generally requires more maintenance than many porcelain or ceramic products and may require sealing or specialized cleaning.

The specific stone should be evaluated for its suitability in a wet bathroom environment, slip characteristics, maintenance requirements, and long-term performance.

Select the Right Floor Finish

The appearance and texture of bathroom flooring can significantly affect both aesthetics and safety.

Polished surfaces can create an elegant appearance but may be less appropriate in areas exposed to water. Honed, matte, textured, and other finishes may provide a better balance between appearance, maintenance, and traction.

Flooring should be selected based on the specific location where it will be installed rather than simply choosing a finish based on appearance alone.

Consider Slip Resistance

Bathroom flooring should provide appropriate traction, particularly in areas that may become wet.

Tile texture, surface finish, size, grout configuration, and the presence of water can all affect how slippery a floor feels underfoot.

Homeowners should consider slip resistance when selecting flooring for showers, bathrooms used by children or older adults, and other areas where wet conditions are common.

Choose the Right Tile Size

Tile size affects both the appearance and installation of a bathroom floor.

Small tiles can provide additional grout joints and greater flexibility around drains and irregular surfaces. Larger tiles can create a more continuous appearance and reduce the amount of visible grout.

The size should complement the bathroom’s dimensions, layout, design style, and floor conditions.

Coordinate Flooring with the Bathroom Design

Bathroom flooring should work as part of the entire material palette rather than being selected independently.

Coordinate the floor with wall tile, shower tile, vanity cabinetry, countertops, plumbing fixtures, hardware, paint, lighting, and other finishes.

A neutral floor can allow decorative walls or fixtures to become focal points, while patterned or distinctive flooring can become a major design feature.

Consider Light and Dark Flooring

Light-colored flooring can help reflect light and make a small bathroom feel more open and spacious.

Darker flooring can provide contrast and create a more dramatic appearance, but it may also make dust, water spots, or certain debris more noticeable.

The amount of natural light, artificial lighting, bathroom size, and surrounding materials should all be considered before selecting the final floor color.

Consider Wood-Look Flooring

Wood-look porcelain tile can provide the appearance of natural wood while offering characteristics more suitable for bathroom environments.

These products are available in plank formats and numerous wood tones, allowing homeowners to create warm, transitional, or contemporary designs.

Wood-look flooring can be particularly effective when homeowners want to introduce warmth into a bathroom without using natural wood in areas exposed to significant moisture.

Consider Heated Bathroom Floors

Radiant heated flooring can add comfort to tile and stone bathroom floors, particularly during Chicago's colder months.

Electric radiant systems are commonly installed beneath compatible flooring and can be controlled using dedicated thermostats.

Heated floors require electrical planning and should be coordinated with the flooring installation, bathroom layout, waterproofing, and other electrical requirements before construction begins.

Consider Accessibility and Aging-in-Place

Bathroom flooring should be evaluated as part of an accessible or aging-in-place design.

Flooring should provide appropriate traction while minimizing unnecessary changes in elevation. Curbless showers, low-threshold entries, accessible clearances, shower seating, and other accessibility features should be coordinated with the floor design and drainage system.

For homeowners planning to remain in their homes long term, selecting flooring with safety and accessibility in mind can make the bathroom more comfortable and adaptable.

Consider Grout Color

Grout contributes significantly to the appearance and maintenance of a tiled bathroom floor.

Matching grout can create a more continuous appearance, while contrasting grout emphasizes individual tile shapes and patterns.

Grout color can also affect how easily dirt and discoloration are noticed. The selected grout should complement the tile while considering cleaning requirements and the amount of maintenance the homeowner is willing to perform.

Consider Grout Type

Different bathroom flooring applications may require different grout products.

Cementitious grout, high-performance cement grout, and epoxy grout each have different characteristics involving durability, stain resistance, maintenance, installation, and cost.

The appropriate grout should be selected based on the tile, location, exposure, joint width, manufacturer requirements, and expected use.

Address Floor Preparation

Proper floor preparation is one of the most important parts of a successful bathroom flooring installation.

The substrate may need to be repaired, leveled, reinforced, waterproofed, or otherwise prepared before tile or another flooring material is installed.

New flooring should not simply be used to conceal an underlying problem. Addressing the substrate first helps create a stable foundation for the finished bathroom floor.

Upgrade Bathroom Waterproofing

Waterproofing is particularly important in wet areas such as showers, but moisture management should also be considered throughout the bathroom.

Waterproofing systems, membranes, transitions, drains, penetrations, and other details should be properly coordinated where required by the construction and flooring system.

Proper moisture protection helps protect the structure beneath the finished floor and supports long-term bathroom performance.

Consider Floor Drainage

Floor drainage becomes particularly important when the bathroom includes a curbless or low-threshold shower.

The floor must be designed to direct water toward the drain while maintaining appropriate transitions and usable surfaces.

Drain location, slope, tile size, waterproofing, and shower configuration should be considered together during planning rather than treated as separate decisions.

Consider Maintenance Requirements

Different flooring materials require different levels of cleaning and maintenance.

Porcelain and ceramic tile are generally relatively easy to maintain, while some natural stones require sealing and specialized cleaning products.

Grout can also require periodic cleaning and maintenance. Homeowners should consider how much time they are willing to spend maintaining the floor before selecting materials.

Historic Chicago Home Considerations

Bathroom flooring in historic Chicago homes may require balancing preservation with modern performance.

Original tile, unusual floor patterns, historic materials, and distinctive architectural details may have value worth preserving. At the same time, damaged substrates, outdated waterproofing, plumbing problems, or previous alterations may require modernization.

Where original flooring cannot reasonably be preserved, new materials can sometimes reproduce the scale, pattern, color, or character of the historic bathroom while incorporating modern construction methods.

High-Rise Condo Considerations

Bathroom flooring in a Chicago high-rise condominium may be affected by building rules, construction requirements, sound considerations, material delivery procedures, and association approvals.

Floor assemblies can also involve sound-control requirements or restrictions on changes to the existing floor system.

Before purchasing materials, homeowners should confirm applicable condominium requirements and coordinate the flooring installation with the contractor and building management.

Current Bathroom Flooring Design Trends

Current bathroom flooring designs increasingly combine practical performance with distinctive visual character.

Popular approaches include:

- Large-format porcelain tile
- Marble-look porcelain
- Wood-look porcelain
- Large-scale geometric patterns
- Hexagon and decorative mosaics
- Neutral stone-inspired flooring
- Warm gray and beige tones
- Matte and textured finishes
- Continuous tile designs
- Heated bathroom floors
- Curbless shower transitions
- Natural stone accents
- High-contrast grout
- Coordinated floor and shower tile

The most effective trend is often one that complements the home rather than simply following a temporary style.

Budget Planning

Bathroom flooring costs can vary substantially depending on material, bathroom size, substrate condition, demolition, floor preparation, installation complexity, pattern, grout, waterproofing, and other project requirements.

Bathroom Flooring Option	Typical Cost Consideration
Basic Ceramic Tile	$
Standard Porcelain Tile	$$ Mosaic Tile \| $$–$$$ Wood-Look Porcelain \| $$–$$$ Natural Stone \| $$-$$$ Premium Decorative Tile \| $$–$$$
Heated Flooring	Additional Cost
Extensive Floor Preparation	Additional Cost
Curbless Shower Flooring	Additional Cost

Actual costs vary based on bathroom size, existing conditions, demolition, substrate preparation, material selection, tile pattern, waterproofing, labor, plumbing, accessibility requirements, permits, building requirements, and installation complexity.

Material price is only one part of the total flooring investment. Homeowners should consider the complete installed cost when comparing flooring options.

Questions to Ask Before Buying Bathroom Flooring

Before purchasing bathroom flooring, homeowners should ask:

- Is this material appropriate for bathroom floors?
- Is the surface slip-resistant enough for the intended application?
- Does the material require sealing or special maintenance?
- Is the existing floor suitable for this installation?
- Will the substrate require repair or leveling?
- Is the selected tile appropriate for the shower area?
- Will the tile work with the existing or planned drainage?
- Is the tile available in the quantity needed?
- Should extra material be purchased for cuts and future repairs?
- Does the material coordinate with the shower and wall finishes?
- Is radiant heating compatible with the selected flooring?
- Are there condominium or building requirements affecting the floor?
- Will permits or inspections be required?
- What is the total installed cost rather than simply the material cost?

Common Bathroom Flooring Mistakes

Avoid these common bathroom flooring mistakes:

- Choosing flooring based solely on appearance

- Ignoring slip resistance
- Installing over an unsuitable substrate
- Failing to address uneven floors
- Using inappropriate materials in wet areas
- Choosing tile that is difficult to maintain
- Ignoring grout color and maintenance
- Selecting oversized tile without considering floor conditions
- Failing to coordinate floor slope and drainage
- Overlooking waterproofing requirements
- Forgetting about radiant heating during planning
- Purchasing too little material
- Selecting flooring before coordinating the rest of the bathroom
- Ignoring condominium building requirements
- Assuming expensive materials automatically provide better performance

Our Recommendations

For most Chicago bathroom remodeling projects, porcelain tile provides an excellent combination of durability, design flexibility, water resistance, maintenance, and long-term value.

Mosaic tile can be especially useful for shower floors and areas requiring greater flexibility around drains and slopes. Large-format porcelain can create a clean, contemporary appearance when the existing floor is sufficiently flat and properly prepared.

Natural stone can provide a distinctive luxury appearance, but homeowners should understand its maintenance requirements before choosing it.

Regardless of material, we recommend prioritizing **proper floor preparation, appropriate moisture protection, suitable traction, quality installation, and coordination with the entire bathroom design**.

The best bathroom floor is not necessarily the most expensive material. It is the material and installation system that appropriately balances appearance, performance, safety, maintenance, durability, and budget for the specific bathroom.

Ready to Start Your Bathroom Remodeling Project?

Choosing the right bathroom flooring is an important part of creating a bathroom that looks great, performs well, and lasts for years.

Whether you are remodeling a small Chicago bathroom, renovating a historic home, updating a high-rise condominium, or creating a luxury bathroom, careful planning can help you select flooring that fits your space, lifestyle, design preferences, and budget.

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