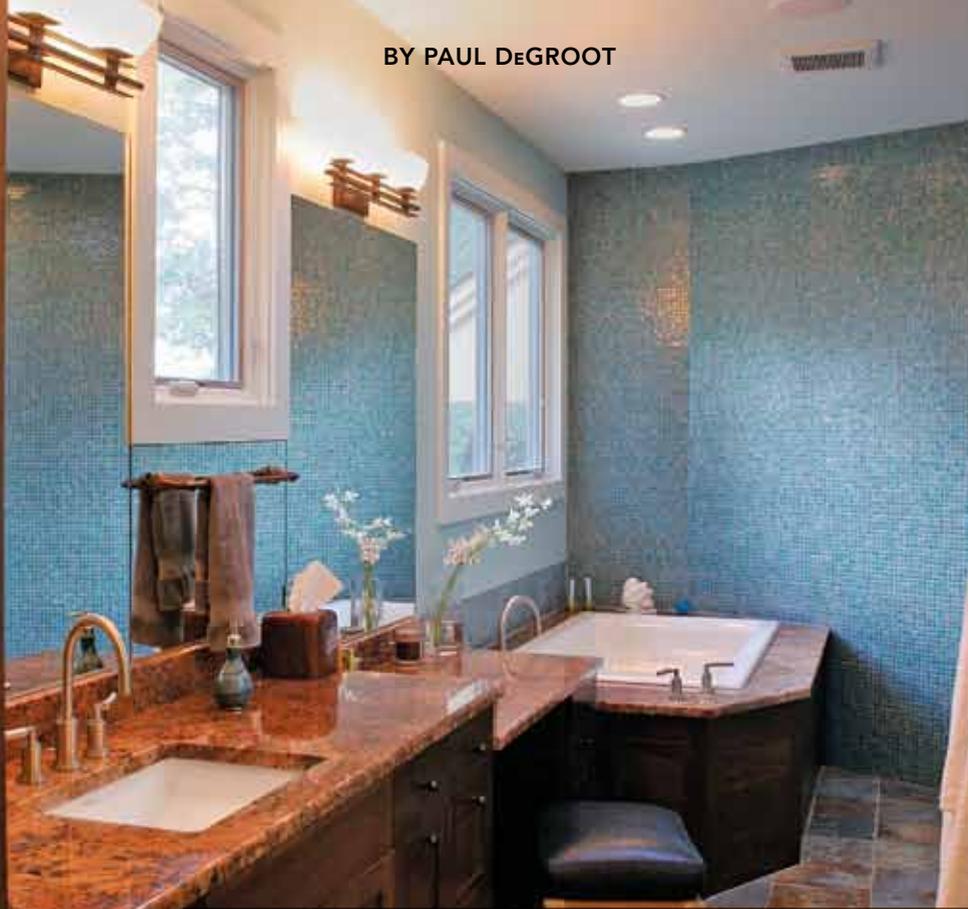


# Master the Master Suite

An architect's RULES and REFINEMENTS for combining bathroom, bedroom, and closets

BY PAUL DeGROOT



**Pocket doors are space savers.** In this small bath, they make a separate water closet possible. A corner medicine cabinet squeezes in a little extra storage.



**Benches, shelves, and hooks.** Don't overlook the convenience of a small bench where you can sit and shave, shelves that can hold soap and shampoo, and some open wall space for towel hooks and bars.

**W**hether they're buying a new house or remodeling their current one, today's homeowners confirm that master suites are a top priority. As an architect, I've designed them for many different home styles and lifestyles. No two suites are alike, but all share basic elements: a bedroom, a bathroom, and closets. Beyond these elements, there are many ways to tailor a master suite to better suit you and your family. On the following pages, photos of my work illustrate the rules I use to design each part of a master suite. The rules are meant to be a starting point, so also consider the refinements that suggest how to make the spaces even better. Once you decide what's important to include in your bathroom, bedroom, and closets, you can begin to plan how they connect.

The floor plans that run along the bottom of each page show suites that I've designed for new homes and remodels. They range in area from under 400 sq. ft. to more than 700 sq. ft., and they meet the needs of each homeowner's unique lifestyle.

Architect Paul DeGroot (pdegroot@austin.rr.com) designs custom homes and additions in Austin, Texas. Photos by Brian Pontolilo.

# RULES FOR A BATH YOU CAN LIVE WITH

## 1. Start with the fixtures

The majority of my clients are couples who want two sinks and a separate tub and shower. They want their own stuff around their own sink, and they dream of soothing candlelit baths. But if they won't be using the bathroom at the same time, the space required for a second sink could be used instead for a place to sit at the vanity, for additional storage, or just to make the bathroom more spacious. Also, if candlelit baths are only a dream, consider losing the tub altogether; you'll save money and space.

## 2. Consider daily routines

Allow some extra floor space if two people will be using the bathroom at the same time. If two sinks are together on the same wall, design a bank of drawers between them so that there's plenty of elbow room. Keep shower doors from swinging in front of a sink, and don't place sinks next to doorways. You can create separation from the rest of the suite by putting a linen cabinet next to the door instead. Finally, put the toilet in a separate room. It might

seem claustrophobic at first, but once you get used to it, you'll be thankful for the private water closet.

## 3. Join closet and bath

Although it's not a given, a closet adjacent to the bath is such a common request that I find it hard to start sketching a design without at least checking whether there is space for one. Even a small closet works; the bathroom can become a dressing area.

## 4. Avoid facing the public

Provide as much daylight and as many views as you can, but large windows facing the street or a neighbor should be avoided. A better option is to situate the bathroom so that its views are private. Frosted glass, glass blocks, and small windows placed high in the walls can provide varying degrees of privacy. Operable windows can also provide fresh air.

## REFINEMENTS

Typical vanity heights range from 30 in. to 34 in. If you are tall, you might find a 36-in.-tall vanity to be more comfortable. No rule says that



**Accessorizing the water closet.** A window high in the wall maintains privacy and provides natural light. Turned toward the toilet, the lower left side of the cabinet offers shelves for reading material, an outlet, and a data port. Rope light illuminates the toe kick as a night light.

two sinks must both be at the same height. Also, many off-the-shelf vanity cabinets are 21 in. deep. If you want extra counter space, opt for vanity cabinets that are 24 in. deep.

A well-designed shower can make up for the lack of a separate tub as a space-saving measure. Even better, a doorless shower has an open feel, is more accessible, and can reduce maintenance. A wide, curbless entry can make a shower wheelchair-accessible. Also, consider including a bench in the shower. It doesn't need to be very big, but it's great for propping up a leg. You'll appreciate it more as you get older.

If possible, place the water closet so that it's closest to

the bedroom for quick late-night trips. An outlet is handy for a night-light, or you can use a fan that has a night-light function. A door that swings into the room can remain ajar and block views of the commode. However, designing a water closet for accessibility will dictate a bigger space and a wider doorway.

Make sure to keep some wall space open for towel bars and hooks. Provide room for a cabinet to store clean towels and extra bath supplies. If it's a built-in cabinet, the bottom third of it can be used for a clothes hamper. Finally, consider a north-facing skylight to bring in daylight with minimal direct sun; an operable skylight can also provide fresh air.

Five plans show how to put it together ▶

**385** SQ. FT. WITH A WINDOW SEAT

Space constraints kept this second-floor master-suite remodel on the small side. Otherwise, it's packed with the same amenities found in much larger master suites. There is both a reach-in and a walk-in closet. Because the walk-in closet isn't large enough to dress in, I designed an adjacent dressing area with a window seat that doubles as a great place to curl up with a book. In the bath, one sink is plenty for these homeowners, who opted for the privacy of a separate water closet for the toilet. Pocket doors help the small space seem larger.



# RULES FOR A BEDROOM FIT FOR A KING

## 1. Consider furniture, both present and future

Even if you're happy in your cozy full- or queen-size bed, provide enough space for a king-size bed (you might upgrade, or a future homeowner might have one). A king-size bed centered on a 13-ft.-long wall allows 3 ft. of space on each side of the bed; plenty of room for passage and for night tables. If there will be dressers, chairs, or other furniture around the bed, then you need more space. If there will be a dresser on each wall perpendicular to the bed's headboard wall, then a good starting dimension for the bedroom is 17 ft. square. Adjust this dimension according to the size of the furniture anticipated and according to the feeling you want to convey. A wider room has a spacious, minimalist air, while a narrower room has a cozy feeling.

## 2. Design for activities

If watching TV in bed is one of them, then you need to plan a good place for the screen. Unless the screen is very large, try to keep the viewing distance less than 15 ft. Exercise is another activity that re-

quires extra floor space. Also, do you want a spot to read in your favorite chair or love-seat? If so, you might want to include room for bookcases.

## 3. Daylight in, views out

Scoop up as much sunlight as possible. Morning light is

especially nice for bedrooms; however, don't overdo it with east-facing glass because the low morning sun can be glaring. North-facing windows can bring in wonderful light without much heat gain, but south-facing windows should be shaded from midday sun

with appropriate eaves. Be careful with west-facing windows; the low afternoon sun is also very strong.

Study the site to determine the best views from the bedroom. Arrange windows to frame views from the bed or from a sitting area. Shun



**Bonus bump-out.** A small reading area has three windows with views of the backyard gardens. The lowered ceiling lends a sense of coziness to the space.

## 470 SQ. FT. FOR BOTH PRIVACY AND VIEWS

For a husband who rises early, the bath is located outside the bedroom door, near the master suite's entry, allowing for his quiet escape. Both the toilet and the shower can be isolated from the vanities behind a pocket door. The closets separating the bathroom and bedroom act as a sound buffer. In the bedroom, windows on three walls take advantage of great views.





unattractive views and places where privacy might be compromised by an ill-placed window or patio door.

#### 4. Get the ceilings right

There is nothing wrong with a simple flat ceiling, as long as its height is proportional

to the size of the room. But even big bedrooms can seem cramped and uncomfortable if the ceiling is too low. A 9-ft.-high flat ceiling works well in most master bedrooms; ceilings 10 ft. and higher can have a dramatic effect.

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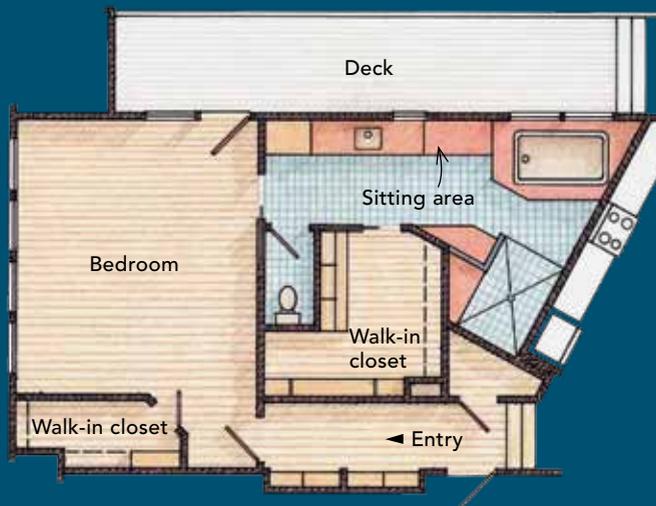
**A sunny domain.** Four windows high on a north-facing wall let ample daylight into this bedroom without exposing it to a close neighboring home. The French doors can be opened for a breath of fresh air or for access to the backyard deck.



**Window-seat retreat.** Early in the morning or at the end of the day, this master-suite window seat is a nice place to relax with a book or a magazine. Adjacent to a small walk-in closet, the seat is also a convenient place to sit and dress.

## 550 SQ. FT. FOR PARENTS WITH OLDER KIDS

This master suite is located near the garage and the kitchen, far from the kids' bedrooms. A long hallway with built-in bookcases separates the suite from the home's living areas, and an exterior door connects the bedroom to a semiprivate deck. In the bath, the homeowners opted for one sink and a place to sit at the vanity. Two windows above the soaking tub capture sunlight and views.





**Buffered by a gallery.** Views from bedroom to bathroom are obscured by a photo gallery with built-in dressers. A walk-through closet also connects the spaces.

(Continued from previous page)

## REFINEMENTS

You can vary the ceiling heights or use a tray ceiling or a sloped ceiling to add visual interest and to make the room seem more spacious. One approach is to design a lower flat ceiling over the bed's headboard while using a higher vaulted ceiling over the rest of the room. The flat ceiling is a good place to install recessed lights for bedtime reading; it's also an excellent platform for hiding cove lights. Likewise, a lower

ceiling over a nook makes a sitting area more intimate.

Today's trend toward larger closets shifts a lot of clothes storage out of the bedroom proper. Minimize the dressers and armoires, and even a 15-ft.-square room feels open and uncluttered. The extra space can be used for artwork, windows, a desk, or bookshelves.

An ideal master bedroom has no view into the bathroom. The entry to the bath might be around the corner, off a small vestibule. If space constraints dictate that the bedroom and the bath be directly adjacent, try to place the bed so that there's no view through the door to the shower, tub, or toilet, and no sightline to a big mirror that reflects views of these private areas.

The master bedroom is a prime candidate for special lighting. Cove lighting bounced off a ceiling yields glare-free ambient light. Adjustable recessed lights can highlight art. Position other recessed lights or wall-mounted sconces around the room to supplement the light from bedside lamps. Although they're inexpensive and practical, I think ceiling-fan lights are unsightly.



# 673 SQ. FT. WELL-CONNECTED TO OTHER SPACES

There are no dead ends in this master suite, which opens to a family room, a porch, and a study. Even the closet opens to the bedroom and the bath. A small bump-out in the bedroom is big enough for chairs and a table, and the gallery has built-in dressers and plenty of wall space for the homeowners' photographs. A door from the bath to the study cuts down the commute for a husband who works at home.



# RULES FOR BIGGER, BETTER CLOSETS

## 1. Don't be stingy

Closets are the workhorse of the master suite. Although you need only 16 sq. ft. (with a 24-in.-wide door) for a walk-in closet, don't stop there. Provide as much closet space as you can possibly squeeze in. If one large closet won't work, find room for two smaller closets. Determine how many linear feet of clothes rod are needed. Whenever you can, use double rods—one high, one low. Eliminate the lower rod where long coats and dresses will hang.

## 2. Avoid exterior walls

The bedroom and the bathroom can better use the space for windows and doors. Exceptions include using a closet as a thermal buffer from a

**Start with the basics.** In a walk-in closet, the must-haves include dresser drawers, open shelves, counter space, and hanging rods. You can fit two hanging rods for shirts and jackets on most walls. For longer items, one higher rod is necessary. Use the space above hanging rods for shelves that hold lesser-used items such as luggage. A tubular skylight illuminates this walk-in closet even on overcast days.

hot west-facing wall (or a cold north wall) or placing a closet along a wall that faces the street or a neighbor's house.

## 3. You can't go wrong with a reach-in

Just make sure to provide an opening wide enough so that reaching beyond the door jamb is easy. If you have space for a 7-ft.-long reach-in closet, then you should plan on a minimum 5-ft. door width.

## REFINEMENTS

If you're stuck with an exterior wall for your walk-in closet, you might choose to include small windows so that you don't always need to hit the light switch. But make sure to keep direct sun from fading clothes. Tubular skylights are a great alternative to windows.

A walk-in closet with clothes hanging on both walls should be at least 7 ft. wide, which nets a 36-in. center walkway. If the closet is big enough to be used as a dressing area, make room for a chair or a stool and a full-length mirror.

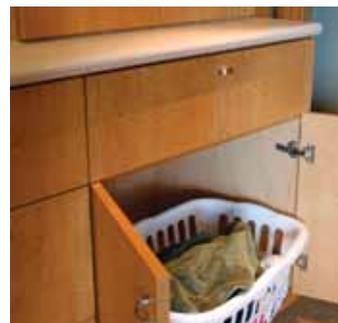
Pocket doors are perfect for walk-in closets because they save space and stay open most of the time. There is

excellent hardware available; for heavy doors, insist on top-quality ball-bearing rollers and the best track available.

Whether you choose store-bought, wall-mounted closet systems or custom built-ins, go for the accessories. I often call for two built-in dressers to hold folded clothes. Each has a countertop above the drawers with a handy outlet for charging a cell phone. Above that are adjustable shelves. Racks of adjustable shelves for shoes are always appreciated, as are deep shelves for luggage. Where ceilings are higher 9 ft. or higher, I specify an extra shelf 12 in. to 15 in. below the ceiling for long-term storage.



**Simple shoe storage.** A typical shelf design can be easily transformed into useful shoe storage by offsetting the shelf pins and turning the shelves upside down. The nosing extends to keep shoes from sliding off the tilted shelf.



**Dirty clothes need a place to go.** A hamper is easy to incorporate into the lower portion of a cabinet in the closet or bath. In place of a drawer, a fold-down door accepts dirty clothes that fall into a basket in the cabinet below.

**766** SQ. FT. WITH WINDOWS TO SPARE

A jog in the entry keeps this master suite secluded from the hallway, while a wall of southeastern windows captures awesome views of Austin's hill country. The study connection was inspired by the homeowner's late-night work habits. The single closet has plenty of room for storing clothes and for dressing. In the bath, the water closet is near the door for easy access during sleepy night-time trips.

