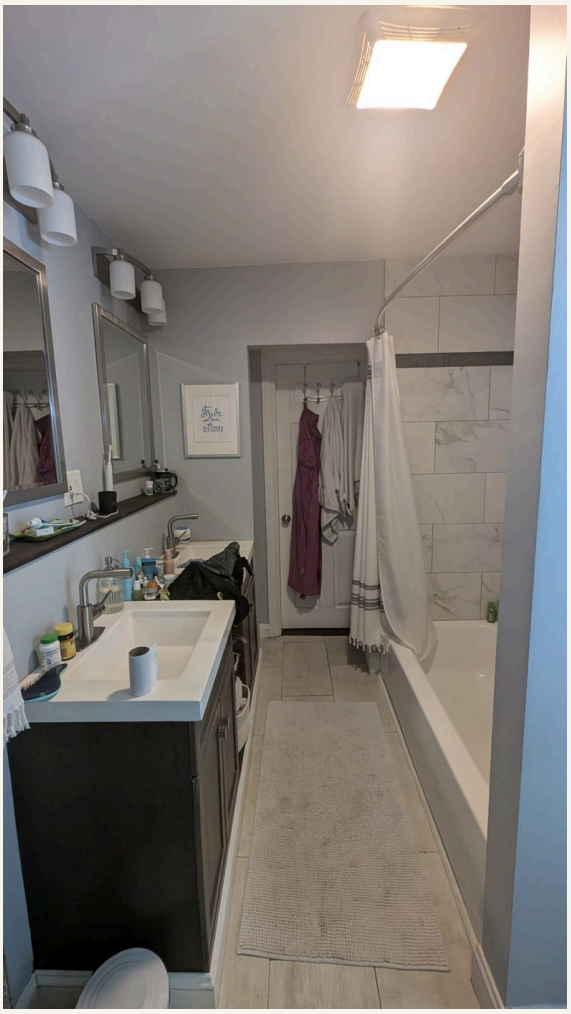
A CATALOG OF IMPROVEMENTS · SUMMER 2026

The Bathroom, Reconsidered

Prepared for my wife, by Dan (with some help)



One room. One demolition. Twenty improvements riding along.

THE PREMISE

Why this, why now

This isn't a project that starts with wanting a prettier bathroom. It starts with a repair we can't avoid: the floor tiles are *floating* — the flipper laid them over a surface that flexes, which is why the grout keeps cracking no matter how many times it gets patched. The professional verdict was clear: the floor has to come up and be rebuilt properly, or we repeat this cycle forever.

Here's the part that turns a repair into an opportunity. The expensive half of any bathroom job is demolition and reassembly. Once the floor is open and the walls are accessible, almost everything else on the following pages costs a fraction of what it would cost on its own — an outlet here, a heating mat there, wiring while the studs are exposed. Skip those things now and they become full projects later. Do them now and they're line items.

So this catalog is really one decision, made once: since the room has to be opened anyway, what should be true about it when it closes back up?

A few things stay exactly as they are: the layout (it works), the radiator (it's staying, and it's getting a cover that turns it into a shelf), and the tub-shower combination (non-negotiable).

SECTION ONE

The floor, done right

Everything in this catalog stands on this. Literally.

Rebuild from the subfloor up

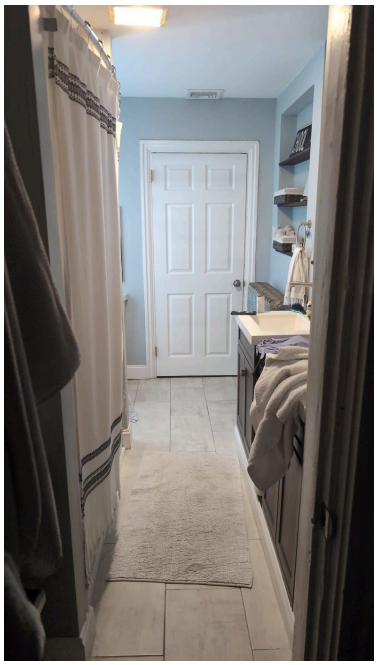
Demolition down to the structure, then cement board or an uncoupling membrane before any tile — this is what the flipper skipped, and it's the difference between grout that lasts thirty years and grout that lasts thirty months.

Electric radiant heat under the tile

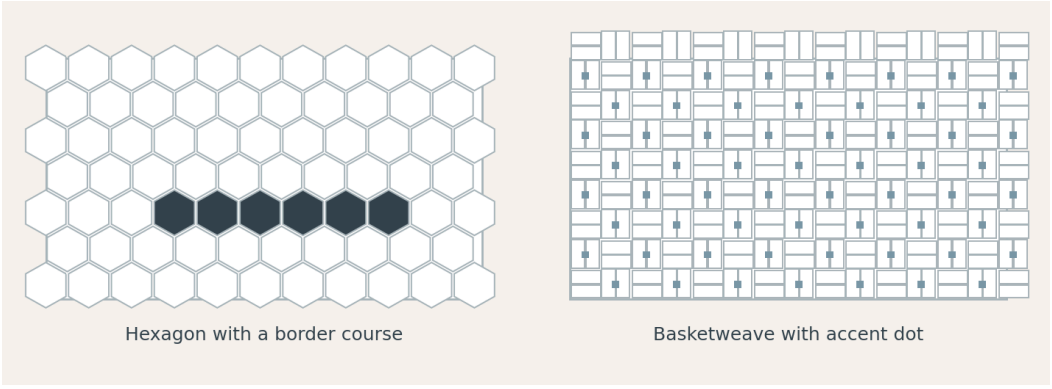
Thin heating mats go directly beneath the new tile and warm the floor on a schedule — nearly free to add while the floor is already open, a full re-demolition to add later, and a genuine luxury every New England winter morning.

Hexagon or basketweave porcelain

The pattern this house would have had when it was built — calm, classic, never trendy and never dated, in a modern porcelain that shrugs off water and pairs with the heating mats.



The current floor: pleasant from a distance, structurally improvised underneath.



PROPOSED The two floor candidates, both period-correct for the house.

SECTION TWO

The tub & shower

The surround tile stays mostly intact. What changes is beneath and behind it.

A deeper soaking tub

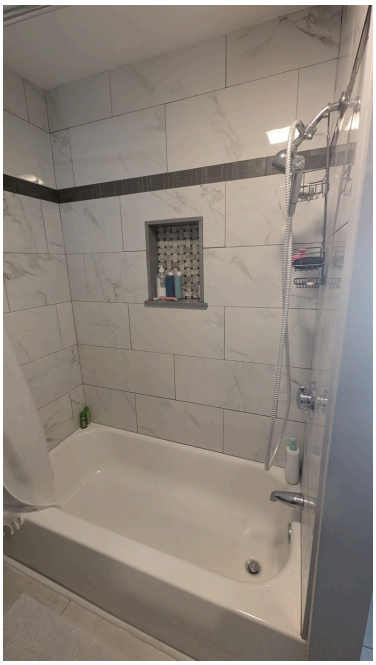
Same length, same footprint, same curtain — but 17 to 19 inches of water depth instead of the standard 14, which means actual soaking and better steam; the current tub's rust staining means it was leaving anyway.

A thermostatic valve behind the wall

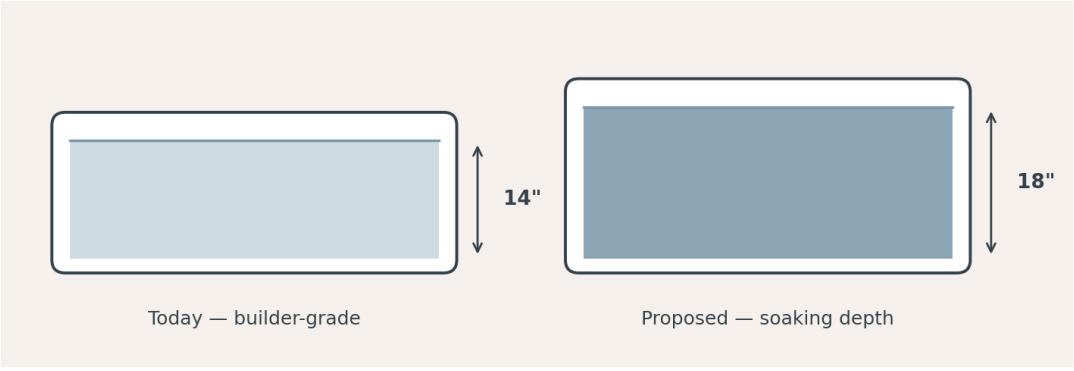
Set an exact temperature and it holds — no drift over a long soak, no scalding surprise when an appliance kicks on elsewhere in the house; invisible, and the single best fixture money in the whole project.

Handheld shower on a slide bar

The sprayer locks at any height for any purpose — tall person, seated person, rinsing the tub, bathing the dog — instead of clipping awkwardly wherever it fits.



The surround survives. The rusting tub beneath it does not.



PROPOSED Same footprint, same curtain — four more inches of hot water.

SECTION THREE

The toilet corner, air & light

The unglamorous page. Also the one we'll notice every single day.

An outlet at the toilet

There's no power near the toilet today; running a protected outlet while the walls are open costs a few hundred dollars and unlocks the next item — retrofitting it later is a drywall project with an electrician's invoice attached.

A washlet bidet seat

We used these for two weeks in Japan and came home to a toilet that suddenly felt like a flip-phone; heated seat, warm water, and a permanent end to the toilet-paper economy.

A real exhaust fan with insulated ducting

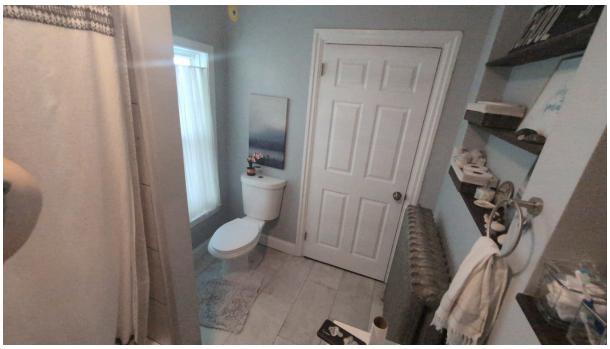
The current fan tries; the problem is the cold, uninsulated duct in the attic where steam condenses and airflow dies — a humidity-sensing fan with a proper duct run turns itself on, clears the room, and protects every other dollar in this catalog from moisture.

Layered lighting on dimmers

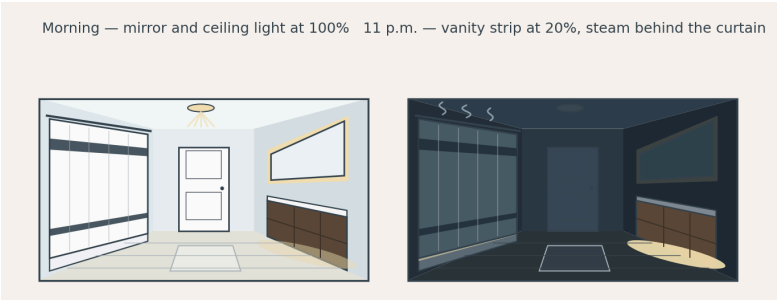
Face-level light at the mirrors for mornings, everything dimmable to 20 percent for baths and late nights — the same fixtures doing task lighting and mood lighting depending on one switch.

An under-vanity light strip

A soft glow beneath the floating vanity that doubles as the world's most civilized 3 a.m. nightlight — no more full-brightness retina shock.



The corner in question: window, radiator, and a toilet awaiting electricity.



PROPOSED The actual room, two settings: morning at 100%, evening at 20%.

SECTION FOUR

The vanity wall

Where the daily friction lives — and where most of it disappears.

One floating vanity, all drawers

A single wall-hung unit replaces the two-cabinets-and-a-bridge arrangement; the floor runs continuously underneath so the room reads wider, and drawers beat cabinet caves because you see everything from above instead of excavating.

Deeper undermount sinks with overflow drains

The current basins are two inches deep with no overflow — splashback on every face-wash and a flood one distraction away; proper deep basins set under the counter mean you can wipe water straight in and fill the sink without standing guard.

One wide recessed medicine cabinet with a backlit mirror

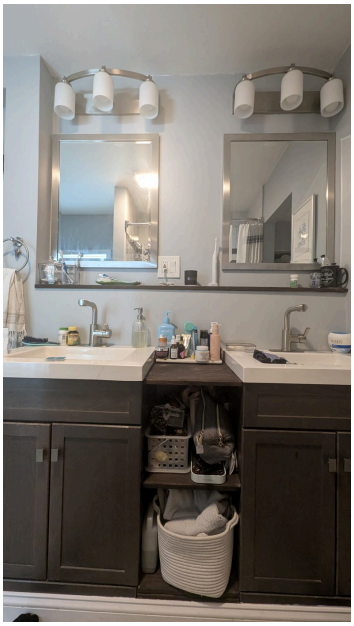
The two small mirrors become one large one — which makes a narrow room feel dramatically bigger — and it's secretly a cabinet recessed into the wall cavity, swallowing every bottle currently living on the ledge.

An outlet hidden inside a drawer

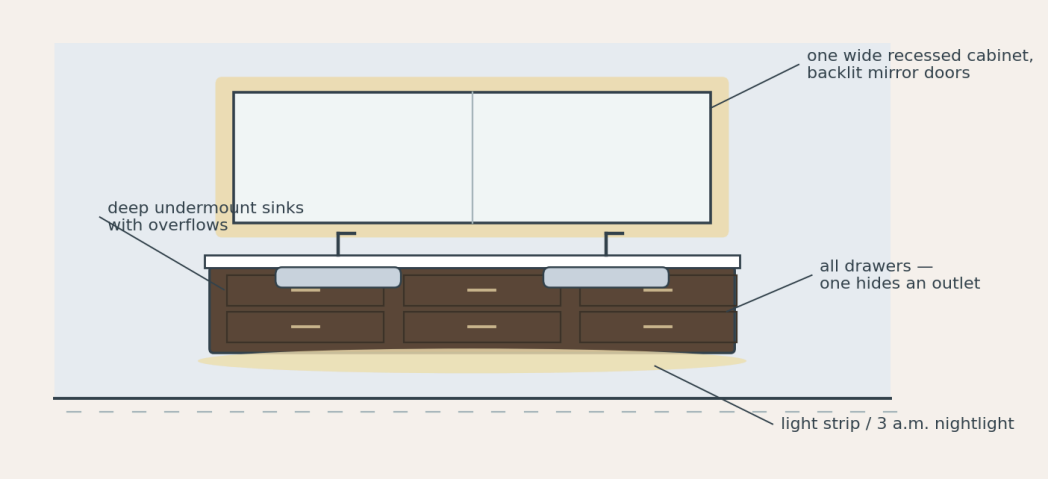
The electric toothbrush and its cord vanish from the countertop forever and charge out of sight.

Organized drawers for the skincare routines

Shallow top drawers with dividers hold every bottle upright in order of use — and since several of those products degrade in light and heat, enclosed storage is genuinely better for them than the current open-shelf sunbathing arrangement.



Two separate vanities, a wood bridge, and every product we own, on display.



PROPOSED The vanity wall, after: one mirror, one cabinet, zero countertop clutter.

SECTION FIVE

Storage & finishing touches

Small carpentry, outsized calm.

A built-in linen cabinet in the nook

The same footprint as today's open shelves, but with proper shelving and a door — closed storage that looks like it was always part of the house instead of an improvisation.

A dedicated hamper spot

The pile of towels on the counter isn't a habit problem, it's a missing fixture — give the laundry an address and the counters stop being one.

Sealed and repaired wood

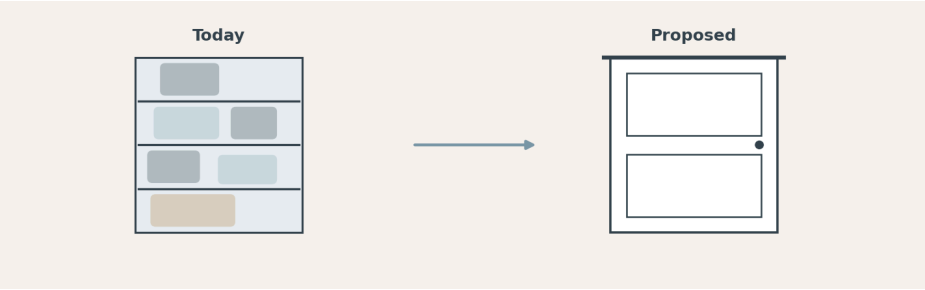
The wood ledge and trim are currently raw and cracked; filled and sealed, they stop absorbing bathroom humidity and start aging like furniture instead of like driftwood — a weekend job we can do before any contractor arrives.

A radiator cover

The cast iron radiator stays (it's excellent at its job), but a fitted cover converts it from shin hazard and towel-scorcher into a warm shelf.



The nook: currently open shelves and plastic drawers doing their best.



PROPOSED The nook, promoted from improvisation to architecture.

THE LAST PAGE

What it costs, what it returns

Boston-area ranges, gathered from current local estimates. The chunks reflect what physically has to happen together: everything needing open floors or walls travels as one project.

Phase	What's in it	Range
Chunk 0 — This month, ourselves	Seal & fill the wood, radiator cover, hamper	**$300 – $700**
Chunk 1 — The big one (indivisible: open floor + open walls)	Floor demo, subfloor & membrane, heated floor, period tile, soaking tub & install, thermostatic valve & slide bar, toilet outlet, exhaust fan & new ducting, lighting rough-in & dimmers, vanity-wall wiring roughed in for later	**$12,000 – $20,000**
Chunk 2 — The vanity wall (can lag Chunk 1 if wiring was roughed in)	Floating all-drawer vanity, quartz top with deep undermount sinks & overflows, faucets, recessed backlit medicine cabinet, in-drawer outlet, light strip	**$4,000 – $8,000**
Chunk 3 — Anytime after	Washlet bidet seat, built-in linen cabinet in the nook, drawer organizers	**$1,300 – $2,800**
Subtotal		**$18,000 – $31,000**
Contingency (20%)	For whatever the flipper left under the floor — in a flipped house, assume there's something	**$3,500 – $6,000**
All-in planning number		**$22,000 – $37,000**

What it gives back at resale

The upgrade math. The 2025 Cost vs. Value Report puts the national return on a midrange bathroom remodel at roughly **80% of cost recouped at resale** — the strongest showing for this project since 2007. Boston-area estimates run more conservative, around **60–70%**. Applied to our planning number, that's roughly **$14,000 – $26,000 in added home value**, before any effect on how quickly the house would sell.

The repair math, which is better. A cracking, improperly installed floor isn't neutral at sale time — it's a defect. Buyers and inspectors discount known problems by *more* than the repair costs, because they price in risk and hassle on top of the fix. Fixing it protects value closer to dollar-for-dollar. Roughly a third of this budget is repair, not remodel — money that defends the price of the house rather than gambling on improving it.

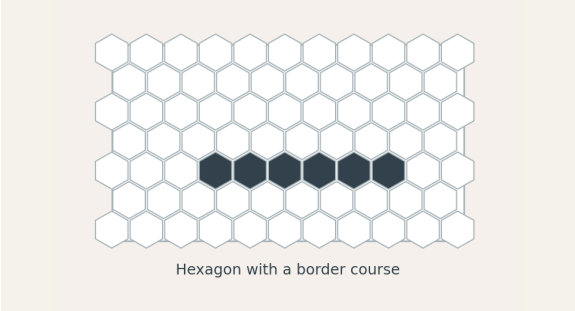
The short version. We spend $22–37K. Somewhere around $18–28K of it comes back at sale between recouped value and defect repair, and updated bathrooms consistently help homes sell faster to more buyers. The remaining gap — call it $5–10K over however many years we live here — is the actual price of warm floors in February, a tub deep enough to soak in, a toilet from this century, and mornings that don't start with negotiating counter space. Divided by daily use, it may be the cheapest room in the house.

Sources: Zonda 2025 Cost vs. Value Report (national); Boston-area recoup estimates via Angi and Zillow market data, 2025–2026. Cost ranges from Boston-area contractor guides; confirm with local quotes.

THE LAST WORD

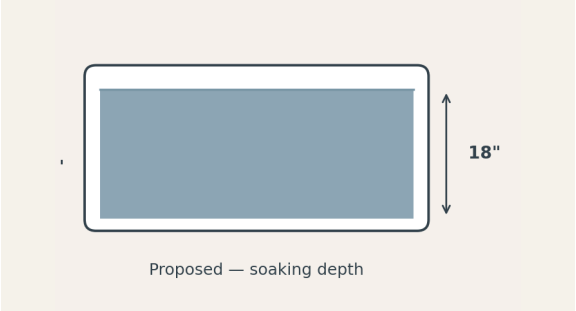
The vision board

The drawn versions live here; the real ones are one search away. Each card carries the exact phrase that pulls up finished installations of that piece — a guided gallery tour, no algorithm required.



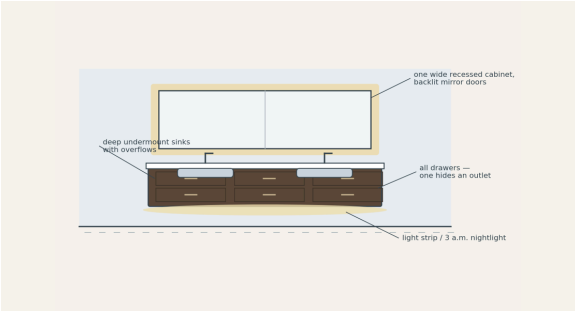
The period floor

`search: "hex tile bathroom heated floor"`



The deep soaker

`search: "60 inch alcove soaking tub install"`



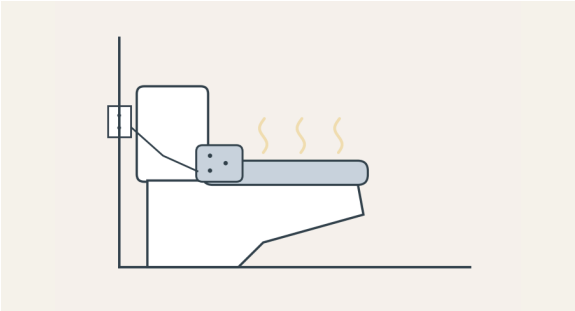
The vanity wall

`search: "floating vanity backlit medicine cabinet"`



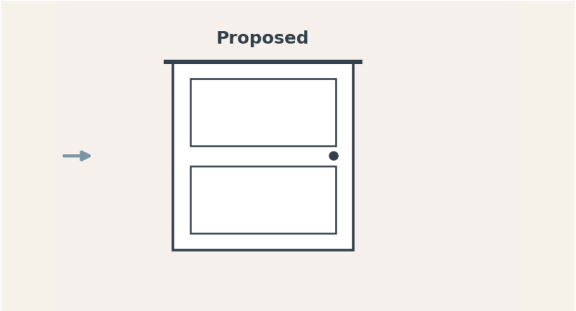
The evening setting

`search: "dimmable bathroom sconces warm light"`



The washlet

`search: "Toto Washlet installed"`



The built-in nook

`search: "recessed linen cabinet bathroom built in"`