
Shower Base Basics:

*Step Up Your
Bathroom by
Stepping Down
Your Shower Pan*



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Get the Truth

7 Myths About One-Level, Curbless Showers



When most people think about a one level (curbless) shower, the words which come to mind are: Grandma, wheelchair, roll in, walker and handicapped. While a curbless shower certainly can be a need for grandma in a wheelchair or a person with mobility challenges to safely enjoy their shower, it's about much more than that.

From my experience, a one-level shower can be cool, contemporary, and stylish all while providing a functional design which will work for life. Let's take a look at 7 myths about one level showers and bust them wide open.

1 Myth: Barrier-Free Showers Aren't Contemporary

As a person who loves a sleek, minimalist contemporary design (you'll see a lot of these if you check out my company Pinterest account) the one-level design does an excellent job breaking down the barriers between spaces in a bathroom. This is helpful because bathroom spaces are usually small and one larger room can create a sense of room, comfort and style.

In one design my remodeling business, Cleveland Design and Remodeling, installed, owners Robin and Pat Baranack specifically chose a one-level shower because they wanted to recreate the clean design of a hip hotel room they stayed in while vacationing in San Diego, California.

2 Myth: You Need a Big Bathroom for a One-Level Shower

I will grant you that creating a one-level shower in a small bathroom takes more planning than picking up a standard fiberglass pan at your local home center store. With that being said, a wet room (also called a one-level, curbless shower) is not as mystifying as contractors make it out to be. The key is to have the right system so you're not going through a major ordeal cutting joists and dropping the height of your subfloor.

The simplest way our company has found to make a wet room, one-level shower in a small space is to use a shower base former and waterproofing kit. The base former comes in sizes as small as 32" x 32" to accommodate very small showers. As Adam Droessler, National Sales Manager of ARC Inc., who supplies these systems says, "One of the top features of curbless showers is the fact they open up the bathroom by 20-25% vs. designing with a curb."

You'll see these designs everyone in Europe and Asia where space is tight. In the United States, we're finally beginning to catch up.

3 Myth: You Can't Have a Door on a Curbless Shower

Some people love the design aesthetic of a clean-looking, doorless, walk-in shower, but others are passionate about having a door to keep the showering space warmer—especially during the cold winter months. (We have a few of those where I live in Ohio!) Your question might be, "Can I have the best of both worlds?" The answer is yes. For a luxurious one-level shower, choose either a frameless glass enclosure or a shower screen (or shower shield). You'll stay warm and it's easy to get into.

4 Myth: No One in My Town Can Install a Curbless Shower

The power of the Internet can help you be victorious over crotchety old-school contractors in your town and provide you with a list of potential contractors knowledgeable and skilled at this work.

First, I recommend going to the National Association of Home Builders website and looking for contractors with a CAPS designation (Certified Aging in Place Specialist). Yes, I personally have CAPS certification, but I have to admit I hate the name. As a 58-year-old guy, I have no plans to "age in place!" People with this designation have deepened their knowledge in universal and accessible design approaches. If you can get a local expert—get them. If you can't, find an experienced roll in shower supplier who can help you contractor get their arms around this type of installation when

they are a 'newbie.' These suppliers may have systems like the one level wet room systems with shower base formers or one level acrylic pans with linear drains.

Another recommendation, from my good friend Rosemarie Rossetti (a nationally known speaker on universal and accessible design and owner of the Universal Design Living Laboratory), is "Installers need to watch the manufacturers' videos and read the instructions on curbless showers. If my husband, Mark can do it, a seasoned contractor can certainly make it happen." I would have to tell Rosemarie—don't cut Mark short though—ha! ha!

5 Myth: There Aren't Many Products for Barrier-Free Shower Pans

As the need (healthcare advances are helping us to live longer but not always age as gracefully as we might like) and desire (one level bathrooms provide a sleek contemporary look which is a hot trend in bath remodeling today) the products have grown consistently with demand. A popular one-level curbless shower base former system makes a simple to install one level bathroom without cutting into floor joists.

A second option is an expanded polystyrene ready for tile shower pan. You simply place it on your subfloor and then tile over it and you have a barrier-free shower.

A third option, if you absolutely HATE tile (and the scrub brush which goes with it), is to use a ramped solid surface shower pan. They come in 51 colors and both smooth and matte finish. Once you've got this shower pan down you can, as the New Yorker's say, "fuggaboutit!"

6 Myth: You Can't Have Many Water Sources in an Open Shower

Definitely not true! If you use a wet room system – where you waterproof the entire bathroom floor – you can create a spa-like environment like something out of the Jetsons cartoon from the 70's and spray yourself into the next galaxy. While lots of water may be fun, it's also not the most environmentally responsible way to go. As aging in place specialist Rosemarie Rossetti commented, "We put in a single hand held shower in our bathroom. This unit was a WaterSense faucet (meeting the EPA criterion) which saves water and is forceful enough to get the shampoo out of your hair quickly as well."

7 Myth: Bath and Shower Design Must Be Simple

In many ways, I think it is easier to create a more elaborate tile design with an open shower because the bathroom and shower are one continuous space with no need to enclose the shower.

Get Prepared

7 Show Pan Blunders You Don't Want to Make



Shower pans are walked on—and ignored—daily. They get no respect. However, I'd argue they're propping up the entire show. The show is your fancy shower heads, niches, contemporary sleek wall panels, tile surrounds and body jets—the things people notice.

If your base fails, you're in a heap of trouble. You can throw in the dumpster all the cool features above the base (and your dollars—literally—down the literal drain with it). Sure, you can cheap out and buy a low-cost shower pan or zone out and put no thought into the shower base design. If you take this route, as they say in high school Latin class, *caveat emptor* (that's a fancy term for 'let the buyer beware').

There's a huge (or hugely, as Trump would say) price to pay for a shower pan that fails, is designed incorrectly, or doesn't work as a family member ages and their mobility goes in the wrong direction. If you manage to avoid the seven blunders ahead, however, you will find yourself standing on solid ground!

1

Blunder: You (and your builder) don't think long term during the shower pan selection process

Your builder— without any input from you—will use the ‘path of least resistance method’ and install the cheapest pan (a fiberglass tub/shower combination) or, in luxury home, get their tile guy to do the tried-and-true ceramic tile surround. In both bases they'll use a standard 4" to 5" high stepover curb for the pan. This 4" or 5" high curb is not a problem initially. It's the ‘eventually’ which can get you in trouble. Initially, you and your family members are healthy and stepping over a shower curb is a breeze. Eventually, your mobility may not be as good. If you can't lift legs over the shower curb, you'll be pulling out your old base for a new one.

DON'T MAKE THIS MISTAKE. Spend time researching zero-threshold, barrier-free, and low-profile shower pans. If you're not familiar with these options, they are level with the floor or have a small curb (about 1 ½" high). They are not only safe but can look cool and contemporary. Just because you've found a better long-term shower pan selection doesn't mean your builder will embrace your choice. You'll need to explain to your remodeler or builder why you need this product and provide them with installation instructions. If they still refuse to get you the pan you want, you may become the “Monty Hall” of shower pan purchasers and look to hire the builder or remodeler behind door #2.

2

Blunder: You choose a shower pan prone to cracking, yellowing and water leaks.

A cracked shower pan that leaks onto your brand-new mahogany dining room table in the floor below with the fancy chandelier and tray ceiling is a bad day. Here's a fact (not exactly rocket science): all shower pans aren't created equal.

If you're building a new home, builders will pack it with cool features in places you'll notice. Granite countertops. Large windows in a great room. A tray ceiling in the bedroom. What builder *won't* do is put much economic value in features they feel you'll pay little attention to (until it's too late). One example: in the kids Jack and Jill bathroom off the hallway, you'll get a fiberglass one-piece shower surround. It's the cheapest slap-it-in solution. If you're doing a tile shower, they'll have their tile guys put in a mud-set pan base (basically a vinyl liner with concrete sloped in the pan). These cheap solutions can become your future nightmare. These bases have a higher failure rate of cracking and leaking (or yellowing and looking ugly).

DON'T MAKE THIS MISTAKE. Don't cheap out on your shower pans! Upgrade to a solid surface or cultured granite shower pan with 15-year or more guarantees—not your builders' fabulous (sarcasm intended) one-year warranty. If you don't want to spend as much, another smart option is a cast acrylic pan which has been reinforced with a multi-density fiberboard underneath (like you'll see in the picture below). This isn't your cheap -grab-off-the-shelf-pan you'll pick up from the big box store. It won't flex and creek like those low-budget acrylic pans. If you're doing a tile shower, use a waterproof-ready for tile shower pan or underlayment systems like those from Wedi Corp or Schluter. These products ensure moisture which gets through the grout joints, won't get through the shower base underneath it (more about this later).

3 You buy a pan for a shower remodel, but don't think about your current drain location

When you're remodeling, drain locations are a BIG thing. If your existing shower pan is in poured concrete, moving it will be dusty, dirty, time-consuming, and expensive. If your shower is on the second floor, changing the drain location will be more difficult than having complete access from the basement below (in the case of a first-floor shower with an unfinished lower level).

If you buy your shower pan, dig deeper into your drain location first so you won't end up sucking up unnecessary expenses to move plumbing or eat restocking fees (IF you're able to return the standard pan).

DON'T MAKE THIS MISTAKE. Take the approximate measurements (with the pan still in place) of your existing shower pan and its drain location. If you are looking to use the same shape and size shower, see if the new pan drain location will line up with the drain hole in your existing shower. Look for standard pans—if possible—to save money. If your drain location is not standard, your choice will be to move the plumbing or buy a custom shower pan. In many cases the more expensive shower pan will actually result in a lower total project cost because you aren't paying a plumber to relocate your pipes.

4 Blunder: You act like a zombie and let your builder 'drive the bus' and use whatever shower pan they choose.

Just because you've hired a builder or remodeler doesn't mean they always have your best interests at mind. If you think about it, most builders and remodelers #1 motivation is ... PROFIT.

Profit is not a dirty word. You need your builder to make money. You want them to make money so they'll be around if you need warranty repairs. However, you need to have a longer-term perspective for a shower pan purchase than your builder. When your warranty is up, they will have moved on to the next job and you will be on your own to deal with the maintenance or costs of a bad purchase.

DON'T MAKE THIS MISTAKE. Before you sign on the bottom line, know which shower pans your builder or remodeler will be installing. Take time to research them and check out online reviews. If it's a site-built system, ask who(m) will be doing the installation (who are they subbing this work to). The reality is that a site-built shower pan (like the mud set ones I mentioned before) are only as good as the specific human being doing the installation.

5 Blunder: You choose a shower pan as high maintenance as your 'easy to get along with' (sarcasm intended) teen.

IMAGE 1: You're on your hands and knees 'attempting' to clean the dingy brownish dirt off the bottom of your fiberglass shower base.

IMAGE 2: You've pulled out the dreaded nylon bristled scrub brush and hydrogen peroxide and you're ready to 'go in' and do battle with your moldy grout joints in your shower base.

When you bought this home, you realized fiberglass showers were cheap. At the time, that seemed like a good thing. Today, you know how hopeless the cleaning process can be. Your tile shower looked BEAUTIFUL when it was first installed. Now you're seeing how much of a pain in the butt this grout maintenance thing can be.

DON'T MAKE THIS MISTAKE. Remember the old saying, 'an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure?' The best way to blow up shower pan maintenance problems is to stop them in their tracks. Instead of choosing a cheap fiberglass pan for a hall or kid's bathroom, go one notch up and select an acrylic shower pan. They are available in standard sizes, fun shapes, are simple to clean and cost effective.

Instead of choosing a tile shower pan, use a solid surface base. They come in 51 colors and have textured floors, so they aren't slippery. If you're asking, "Mike—will they be more expensive than the tile base?" The simple answer is – in the short-run yes. However, in the long run you won't have to worry about the base cracking or leaking, or spending time hiring 'Mr. Grout Joint Cleaning Dude' (the new-fangled grout joint cleaning franchise) to waste your afternoon and money cleaning dirty, moldy joints.

6 Blunder: You decide to DIY using a 'component based' tile shower system when you could get a ready to install option

What would you rather work with:

- ▶ A shower where you're installing a sloped shower pan and then installing a curb component next to it, or...
- ▶ One where everything is all in one unit?

If you're like most when it comes to DIY remodeling, the less components the better. Anyone who would rather be spending more time putting their shower pan together than golfing or hanging out with friends needs counseling.

DON'T MAKE THIS MISTAKE. It's simple to order a waterproof ready for tile shower pan to eliminate the hassle of joining the curb component to the shower pan. Ready for tile bases come in all shapes and sizes and work with various types of glass enclosures. They are lightweight and straightforward to install.

7 Blunder: You buy (or build) the shower pan before you figure out the shape or type of glass (or glass block) you're going to use.

You wouldn't pour concrete or have a mason build your basement foundation if you hadn't planned the 1st and 2nd floor levels. You obviously want the upper floor levels to fit exactly on your foundation. This same logic is true with a shower pan. I've seen people who've bought a standard fiberglass shower pan with a 2" wide curb and then call to do a glass block shower wall (which is 3 1/8" wide). The block wall will not fit onto the curb depth. I've also seen homeowners who have wanted curved glass walls, but the curvature of the base they've built did not fit the curvature of the glass. This is a HUGE problem.

DON'T MAKE THIS MISTAKE. It's not hard to solve the shower pan shape problem when (using a borrowed version of the Stephen Covey quote) you 'begin with the glass in mind.'" Determine the shape and type of glass you want to use. For example, if you love the colors and low-maintenance aspects of glass blocks (which cannot be cut) you'll want to work with a glass block shower designer to help with a layout before building or buying your base. What's nice is then the shaped glass wall can be designed to fit like a glove with either a solid surface shower pan or a ready for tile one.



Get Rid of Barriers

5 Compelling Reasons to Eliminate Your Shower Pan Threshold



Figuring out the right shower pan to use can be a pain. Do you get a traditional shower base with a 4 to 5" step over curb? Would a low-profile curb (1 ½" tall) be the ticket or would it allow water to spill out onto the bathroom floor? Could you ditch the shower curb entirely and choose a ramped entry or one-level wet room?

I've talked to thousands of homeowners over the last 20 years about shower pan options, and I'll tell you the case for blowing up the shower curb—having no threshold at all—has never been stronger! You should seriously consider going with a curbless shower for your next bathroom remodeling project.

1 You're getting older.

Duh, you're probably saying ... aren't we all getting older? Yes, that is true. I would add the good news is we are living longer, but the bad news is (somedays) we're living longer. The aches and pains in the morning do stack up as those gray hairs (if you're lucky enough to get them without becoming "bulbed" as my daughter used to call bald people when she was young) start to mount. While growing older is a blessing, on some days it can also feel like a curse. I know I've asked myself why my body has "wear" parts? Why can't I look as lean as my 18 and 22-year-old sons who don't have to watch what they eat (but I digress)?

When we age, the unfortunate fact is our mobility goes the wrong direction. Stepping over a shower curb can be a dangerous thing. It is the cause of many expensive and challenging hospital stays. When you have a one level shower entry there is no curb to trip over. These zero clearance shower base designs are growing rapidly in the remodeling market—even though few new home builders (even construction companies who build in 55+ lifestyle communities) incorporate them in new home designs. A zero threshold shower can be made with either a tile floor or with a durable acrylic pan with a linear drain you see below. If you want to stay safe the one level designs are increasingly important as you age.

2 You'll save space.

For most people this tip doesn't seem logical but if you've ever visited Europe or Asia and stayed in a hotel room (or a friend or relatives house) you'll see lots of examples of one-level bathrooms with open showers in small spaces. The reason curbless showers save space is they break down the barriers of the traditional "shower enclosure" defined by the shower pan and glass enclosure. With a waterproof curbless shower, the shower and the bathroom are one continuous space. If you've got a small bathroom (possibly in an apartment, loft, tiny home, or micro-home) this can be a space-efficient way to get 'er done (as Larry the Cable guy) would say. Small spaces and curbless designs go perfectly together.

3 You'll show your cool, sleek and minimalist good taste.

Design trends have changed a ton from the super-sized mega-mansions of the 1990's with expansive soaking tubs and ornate tile designs. What's hot today is a contemporary, clean, sleek and minimalist bathroom. These spaces use large format tiles (or sleek grout free shower panels) and often have wall hung vanities and open and airy designs. Curbless showers are a perfect contemporary fit with this design trend.

4

It's never been easier to create a one level bathroom.

In the old days making a one-level bathroom was a pain in the butt. Most contractors would scratch their heads trying to figure out what to do. In most cases, they would “drop the floor” of the bathroom. What this meant was cutting into your subfloor, then cutting your joists and reframing the area so they could pour concrete into the new “hole.” Then they would level by hand (imagine how much you're going to like have concrete poured inside your bathroom—it's not like you're doing a driveway and the concrete truck is going to have the material come down the chute!). This process is not only laborious and time-consuming to build. It's not a great system because it can compromise the structural integrity of your home.

Thank goodness there are new simple options. Today, you can get a wet room kit. With these kits, you (or your contractor) cut the subfloor and install a product called a “shower base former” directly on your existing joists (no cutting of the joists and messing up the integrity of your framing anymore. Once the base former is in and plumbing hooked up, cement board will be brought to the height of the base former. Finally, the bathroom floor will be waterproofed and tile installed on the finished surface.

A second option is to use a ramped solid surface shower pan. These pans can be set directly on the subfloor and come in multiple color and design options.

A third option is to use an acrylic shower pan with a built in linear drain. It's the most cost effective of the 3 – but it does have size limitations.

5

You'll have more flexibility.

I wish I could tell you getting rid of your shower with a threshold would give you more flexibility to climb stairs or jump as high as your cat (isn't it amazing how high they can jump?). You'll just have to enroll with your spouse in a few yoga classes (OK maybe more than a few) to make this happen. Where I do think one level wet room can help your flexibility is you will no longer have to have your space be “defined” by the shower pan and glass enclosure. So, if you decide you want to change out the glass enclosure to make the shower bigger, smaller or change its shape you can do it. How cool is that?

The reality is the times are ‘a changing.’ Construction methods are ‘a changing’ and your thoughts about bathroom remodeling (and what type of shower base to use) should be ‘a changing’ with them. If you're dealing with an old (or young) stuck-in-the-mud contractor using outdated installation methods, don't put up with it anymore (I'm guessing you're not using the same computer, you used 20 years ago. Your contractor shouldn't be using the same approach to creating one level showers they did 20 years ago.

If you're having a tough time making this project a reality call us at the number below or add your questions or comments to this post. We are looking forward to helping you! One level bathrooms aren't as difficult as some contractors make them out to be.



Get the Right Foundation

How to Choose the Right Type of Shower Base



Isn't it a pain trying to plow your way through the material choices and products in a bathroom remodeling project? When it comes to remodeling a shower, I would argue the single most important decision is the shower base (or shower floor or pan as some call it). Why do I say the base is so critical? Well, the base is the foundation of the shower. Just like your home, if the foundation of your shower cracks or gets moldy, "Houston, you have a big problem!"

Failure of your shower floor pan can cause leaking onto the floor below and result in needing to redo your entire shower (the glass enclosure, interior shower wall surround panels and base) and whatever additional repair work is needed in the level below. My Dad used to tell me, "Mike, don't be penny wise and pound foolish." Buying the cheapest pan you can find (or hiring somebody who doesn't know what they are doing install a site built pan for you which fails) can have disastrous results. Here are five critical questions that can help!

1 How important is the initial purchase price?

I get it when people say their budget is tight. Since I'm funding two kids in college starting this fall, I feel your pain. With that being said, if you plan to stay in this home for a while going cheap with the shower base can be a big mistake and bring back the famous slogan of the Fram oil filter commercial from the 1980's: "you can pay me now or you can pay me later."

How much you spend should be determined by your goals for the property, who will be using it and what looks best for you. For example, if this home is an investment property in a low-priced neighborhood you plan to flip, it can make sense to choose a cheap fiberglass standard shower base (these pans will cost \$150 to \$300 range). If you want a nicer base where you can even get a few color choices an acrylic shower pan is a smart option (they run in the \$250 to \$900 if you buy a unique shaped acrylic pan).

2 Is style important?

If you've committed to remodeling your bathroom you are already determined to improve the looks of the space – otherwise you wouldn't consider investing your hard-earned money in this project. If you want a stylish shower – with some color and shape – you won't find it in a mass produced (and low-cost) fiberglass pan. To inject style – you're going to pay more (but it doesn't have to be a lot more). Here's 3 cool ideas to get a stylish shower base without going crazy-over-the-top with your budget:

- ▶ **Choose a shaped acrylic shower base.** There are fun bases like the curved acrylic pan below which not only give you a cost-effective way to get a sleek, contemporary curved glass shower, but also add elbow room in the process.
- ▶ **Select a solid surface shower pan** With 51 different colors in these shower floor pans you can say goodbye to boring white and beige units. Who wants to live in a boring world anyway?
- ▶ **A custom-made tile shower base.** While tile pans are a pain to clean – they offer unlimited design possibilities. Choose large format tiles for a contemporary look. Use a fun colored mosaic. Go with pebble stone for a Zen-inspired feel.

3 Do you need a custom size?

In remodeling you've got to work with the "cards" (or shower shape or size in this case) you've been dealt. You may go to your local big box store and see the \$250 shower pans and think, *Cool, we can afford this project.* Then you go home and figure out you don't have a standard 60 x 32, 48 x 36 or 36 x 36 shower pan. Now what?

If you want a custom pan, throw out standard fiberglass and acrylic pans as an option. Your choices come down to cultured marble, solid surface pans, one-level wet room systems and custom tile pans. It's nice to know you can still get an easy to install pan, even if you want to DIY and you need a custom size. What you'll need before ordering a premade pan (like the cultured marble or solid surface option) is your stud to stud measurements. If you have a funky shape (perhaps a weird angled wall in the back or you need an offset shower pan because you have a stud wall in the front), don't fret —these style bases can be made to size for you.

With a custom size, you can also opt for a site built tile shower or get a premade ready for tile shower pan. The premade ready for tile pans simplify the installation, are factory-made and guaranteed not to leak (that's huge).

4 Who is going to use this shower? What type of shower entry do you need?

All shower bases are not created equal. Some have tall shower curbs. Some are designed with a lower "profile" (that's an industry term for height) curbs. Some have no "barriers to entry" (this phrase reminds me of my college economics classes—which I'm strange enough to admit I liked) where you can roll in wheelchair in or walk in without stepping over a curb.

When choosing the best base you want to make your selection with an eye on not only who is going to use this shower today – but who might use it tomorrow.

If you have elderly parents do you think it's possible they will need to live with you as they age? If so, a low profile or barrier free pan is a smart choice.

If you have young boys who will use and abuse their shower (I completely relate to this since I've got a 22 and 18-year-old sons whose bathroom is a mess until their Mom or I get on them), a durable solid surface pan will even stand up to young dudes like my sons. If somebody using the shower struggles with their weight, I would not recommend a fiberglass pan which can flex. A better choice is a stone shower pan which is as solid like a rock.

While the number of shower base choices is large – it's not difficult to get this decision correct. Step back and think about who(m) will use this shower (both now and in the future). Figure out how much money you need to spend to get a base which won't fail. Ask yourself if style and low maintenance are important. Finally, determine if you need a custom size.



We serve local and national clients. If you are outside of Cleveland and Columbus, Ohio we invite you to call 877-668-5888 for more information about low-barrier showers.

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