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PHIL VELASQUEZ/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Environs Development built the Bucktown neighborhood home of Jennifer Dresden, right. Said company President Ken Brinkman, left: Elegant may be "in," but ornate is "out."

Soaking it all in

Master baths go from pure function to luxury experience

BY ERIK J. MARTIN
Special to the Tribune

Real estate agents call it the most valued room in a home after the kitchen. Jennifer Dresden just likes to call it her "getaway place" — a private sanctuary where she can wash away stress in her round free-standing tub or her deluxe walk-in steam shower, the latter amply appointed with body spray jets, hand-held and rain shower heads, limestone and a marble bench.

It's so comfortable in the luxury master bath at the newly built Bucktown neighborhood home that Dresden and her family moved into in September, it's often hard to leave.

"I can spend an hour in my shower alone," Dresden said. "It makes me feel like I'm in a luxury spa."

Ask Chris Naatz, vice president of sales and marketing for D.R. Horton in Chicago, and he'll tell you that the modern master bath made the leap from practical to posh in recent years.

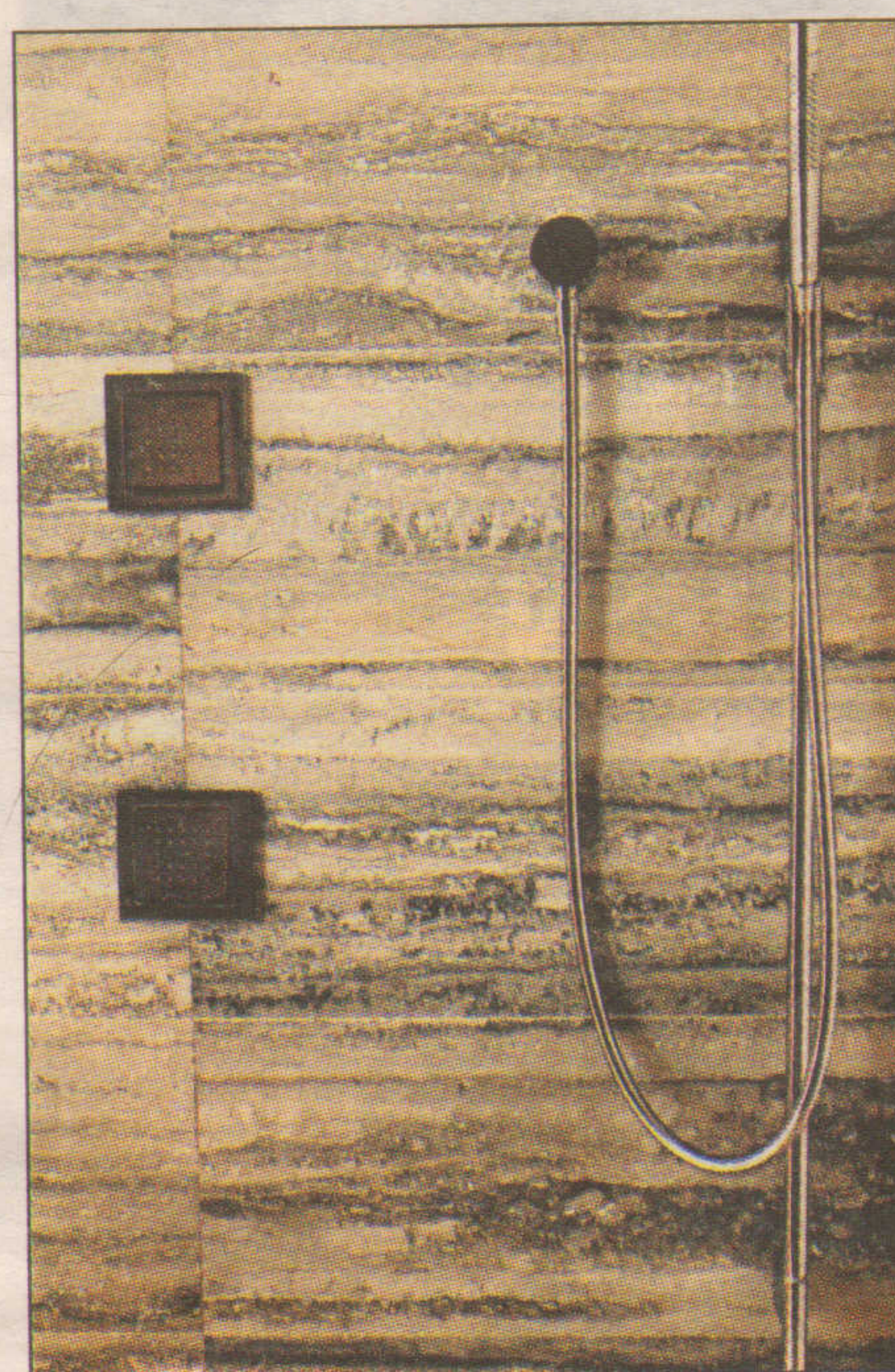
"We saw the master bath change from a tub-shower combination and perhaps one sink to a double-bowl vanity, separate shower and separate tub. This transformed the master bath from pure function to a luxury experience," Naatz said.

"When showing a home today, sales professionals and builders save the master suite and the master bath for last to give

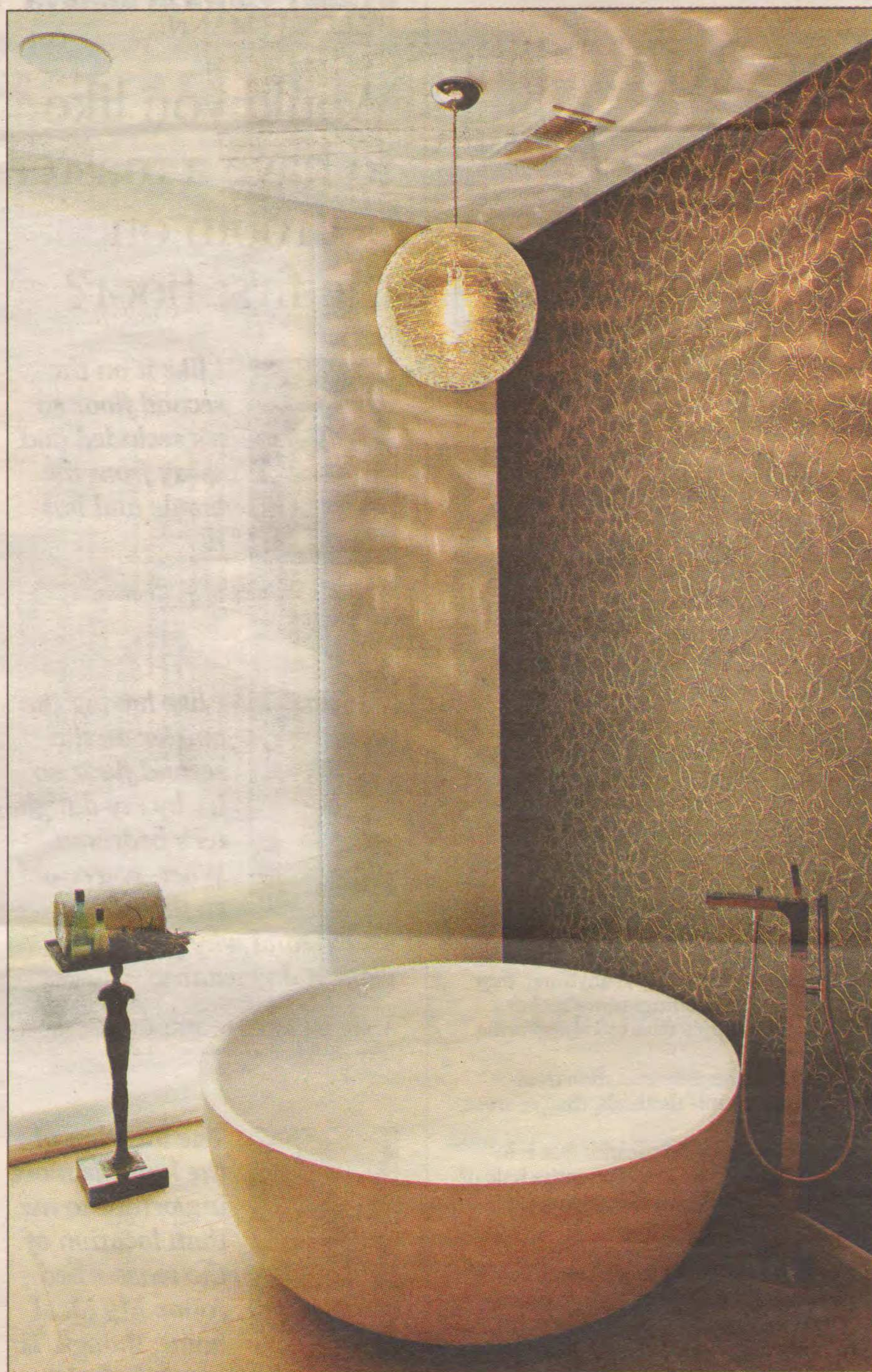
that lasting 'wow' impression," said Todd Warshauer, director of sales and marketing for William Ryan Homes in Chicago.

Orren Pickell, president and chief executive of Orren Pickell Building Group in Northfield, said that while buyers prefer more creature comforts and higher-end materials in their master baths, the room itself has decreased in size by as much as 20 percent from a few years ago.

"When rooms get too big, they don't always feel cozy, comfortable or warm," Pickell said. "More buyers are now opting for the jewel box concept, where they build the exact right-sized home for their needs but fill it full of nice things and fine finishes."



The walk-in steam shower has body spray jets, and hand-held and rain shower heads.



Jennifer Dresden calls her master bath, with freestanding tub, her "getaway place."

Trends

Alan Zielinski, a certified kitchen designer in Niles and president of the National Kitchen and Bath Association, said several interesting trends are under way in the master bath, based on the latest association data:

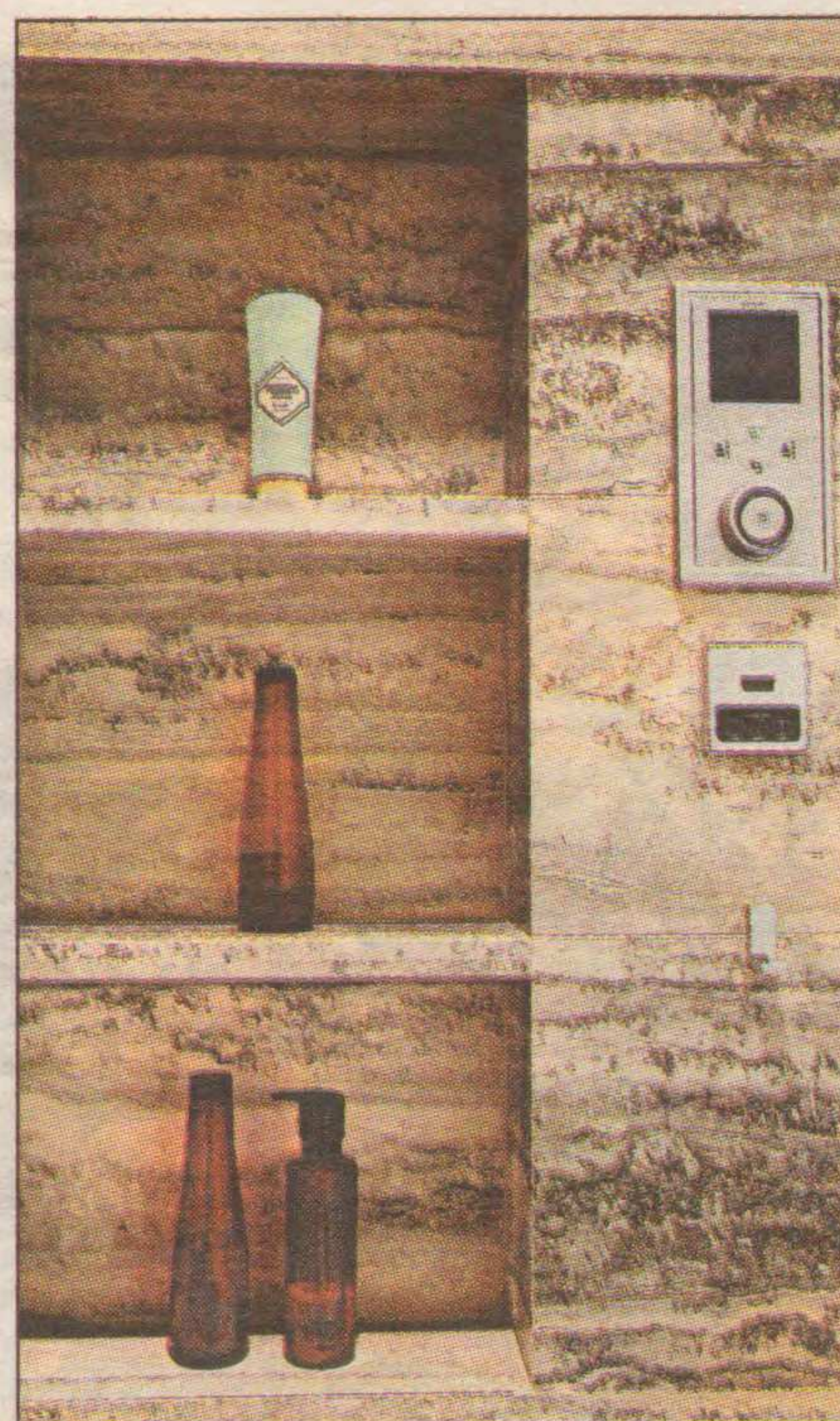
- Transitional styles are more popular than traditional designs.
- Among fixtures and accents, polished chrome is staging a comeback (increasing from 46 percent to 65 percent the past year) against brushed metal finishes currently in vogue.
- Whites, off-whites, beiges and bones,

greens and blues are, in order, the most preferred color schemes.

■ Granite and quartz remain the top choices in vanity top materials, followed by marble, with glass proving to be a niche material that has doubled in popularity the past two years.

"We're seeing buyers trending toward whiter and lighter baths," said Victoria Birov, interior designer with Heritage Luxury Builders in Northfield. "White Calcutta, Carrara or statuary marble is virtually a prerequisite among our clientele on the North Shore."

Ken Brinkman, president of Environs Development in Chicago, the firm that



Dresden's shower contains built-in niches. An upgrade to a luxury master bath can range from \$3,000 to more than \$10,000.

What to consider for a luxury bath

Here are some key considerations for an upscale master bath plan:

- Can the room easily accommodate two users at the same time?
- Will you use a tub, or is the shower sufficient?
- Is the shower appropriately sized and equipped with enough amenities?
- Is there adequate hot water for your needs?
- Is there enough natural and artificial light?
- Are the vanities positioned for maximum spatial efficiency?
- Do you require more toilet privacy?
- What is the expected life span of the chosen materials?
- Is the bathroom "future-proof" (designed for high resale value)?

built Dresden's home, added that elegant may be "in," but ornate is "out."

"Homeowners are looking for classic, clean lines in their luxury master baths. They no longer want highly decorative elements," Brinkman said.

"We're also finding more of a preference for natural and organic materials, like walnut, bamboo and unusual stone, as well as higher-end faucets and fixtures."

Among the newest options that could continue to rise in the ranks are warming drawers/racks for towels, televisions in the mirror or on the wall, LED lighting, quiet fans and showers featuring more shower heads, spray patterns and steam, Zielinski

said.

While the separate tub and shower design prevails for most homeowners, "many buyers today are looking for large, luxury walk-in showers, with no desire for a separate tub.

For example, buyers can choose custom shower options with tile on all sides, including the base floor. These showers are often large enough so that a door is not necessary," Naatz said.

"Huge whirlpool tubs have also been less in demand," Birov said. "Now we're seeing more soaking tubs or air jet stand-alone tubs being put in. Many of our clients say they want to eliminate the bathtub altogether in their master bath, but we suggest that it's a good idea to have one for increased resale value."

Upgrades

Court Airhart, president of Airhart Construction in West Chicago, said he recommends three particular master bath amenity upgrades to his customers that he said they would later regret not choosing: a larger shower; an upsize custom mirror, preferably from vanity to ceiling; and custom cabinets that add flair and detail.

Other contemporary options to consider, according to Milena Birov, real estate agent with @properties in Winnetka and co-founder of Heritage Luxury Builders, are programmable showers (with digital controls and cutting-edge valves that allow you to select your preferred water pressure and temperature) and surround-sound music systems that you can sing along with in the shower.

"Additionally, warming mats below the tile floors, particularly with our Midwestern winters, are popular, as are warming seats in the showers," Zielinski said.

"And heated mirrors built into the tile designs create a fog-free environment."

Costs

Whether you're building a custom home from scratch or selecting a builder's floor plan, it's important to personalize your master bath to your tastes and preferences, while also keeping resale appeal in mind, as far as your budget will allow. Warshauer said the cost to upgrade from a standard amenity-equipped to a luxury master bath can range from \$3,000 to more than \$10,000, depending on the design, builder and location.

"The master bathroom typically costs twice as much to build as normal square footage — possibly \$200 per square foot, on average, versus \$100 a square foot in other living spaces," Airhart said.

Because an upscale master bath is such a valuable investment, it may also be wise to hire an outside designer to work with your builder and help maintain a consistent and affordable vision.

"We hired a separate designer because we felt like we needed another pair of eyes to make sure everything we envisioned would be interpreted correctly," Dresden said.