Seven tips to transform your downstairs loo

The humble WC has become the star of the house. If yours needs a facelift, there are plenty of ways to take it from basic to beautiful

By Emma Chapl
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Bold cloakrooms and bathrooms are currently experiencing a colourful, rose-tinted-glasses-on opportunity, to be decoratively experimental | GROUP Interiors Limited

The sunshine may have been late to the party this year, but with longer days finally in swing and balmy nights on the horizon, many of us are prepping the Pimm's and welcoming friends at home for those easy Sunday lunches that languidly slip into dinner. And that's where the loo comes in. Because, unless you're one of the very lucky, and sight unseen organising order in the stairs, the cloakroom has had a retread, as the interior designers currently noticing a surprising upswing in demand for daring designs.

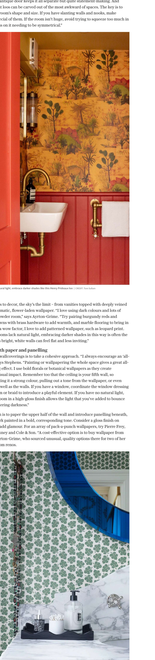
These once modest spaces now represent an opportunity to be decoratively experimental, no doubt inspired by the playful opulence seen in the bathrooms of restaurants and luxurious members' private clubs.

It's like the Derby. A first-timer's loo became a great vehicle for fun colours, patterns and design | GROUP Interiors Limited

"An appreciation for beautifully designed boutique hotels is definitely a factor," says designer Sophia Ayrton-Gomez of Studio Sufi. "Their cloakrooms have become real 'wow' moments, featuring incredibly quirky and bold designs. As a result, we're inspired to re-route them at home. Small WCs are considered half-spaces, because they're not obviously on show or in prominent areas. That means they are a great vehicle for fun colours, patterns and design."

A well-considered guest loo can add value to your property, too. "That's because it completes the public areas of the home," says Marcin Lavianek, of architecture firm Squire & Partners. "It's invaluable for ease of family life, as well as being key for those who enjoy entertaining. It can be carved out of the smallest spaces – under stairs and in awkward corners – but ideally on the same floor as the living room. Often it might be a small space with limited or no natural light, but it has the greatest potential: it's an opportunity for creating a moment of fantasy."

Those of us who have one ought to be throwing ours love by way, and those who don't can create one with a little ingenuity...



Loos can be carved out of the most awkward of spaces, as in this Derby & Hornet cloakroom

Location, location
Even if you've only limited under-stairs access in period homes, there are also **Location, location**
While loos are often listed under staircases in period homes, there are also opportunities to get creative, especially if you are planning a reconfiguration. "We're currently designing a kitchen extension with a powder room in between the new space and the existing living room, so essentially in the middle of the house, where there is better head height and space to create a beautiful scheme," says interior designer Laura Hourigan. "We also recently designed a multifunctional space where we split the room using a pretty curtain with a trim, our ball bring for coat and shoe storage, the other half behind the curtain revealing a compact WC."

If you're space, conjoining two areas in this way to accommodate a loo and a coat cupboard is a good idea, but it's also worth considering how you can make the most thorough is to use the space under the staircase, as Ayrton-Gomez did with a dado, make something special of them. If the room isn't huge, avoid trying to squeeze too much in and don't focus on it needing to be symmetrical."

When basics lack natural light, ordinary fabric shades like this Navy Pinkney by | GROUP Interiors

Add drama
If you have space to decor, the sky's the limit – from vanities topped with deeply veined marble, to dramatic flowers-laden wallpaper. "I love using dark colours and lots of pattern in a powder room," says Ayrton-Gomez. "Try pairing burgundy reds and chocolate browns with brass hardware to add warmth, and marble flooring to bring in light. For extra wow factor, I'd choose a statement wallpaper, such as leopard print. When cloakrooms lack natural light, embracing darker shades in this way is often the best option, as bright, white walls can feel flat and less inviting."

Re-cheer with paper and panelling
The key with wall-coverings is to take a cohesive approach. "I always encourage an 'all-over look," says Hourigan. "Painting or wallpapering the whole space gives a great all-encompassing effect. I use bold florals or botanical wallpapers as they create beautiful backdrops for artwork and mirrors, and also look great if you have a sizeable panelling if a strong colour, pulling out a tone from the wallpaper, or even papering it as well as the walls. If you have a window, coordinate the window dressing – use a fun trim or braid to introduce a playful element. If you have no natural light, painting the room in a high gloss finish allows the light that you've added to bounce around, countering darkness."

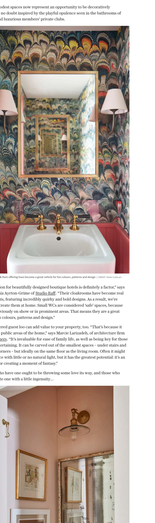
A smart option is to paper the upper half of the wall and introduce panelling beneath, with woodwork painted in a bold, corresponding tone. Consider a glass finish to woodwork to add glamour. For an array of pack-a-punch wallpapers, try Peves Prey, House of Hackney and Cole & Son. "I can't offer enough praise to Ivey-Wallpaper from Etsy," adds Ayrton-Gomez, who sourced unusual, quality options them for two of her latest cloakroom rescues.

This Derby & Hornet cloakroom is the kind of paper Company employs the patterned wallpaper | GROUP Interiors Limited

Make a splash
Unlike full-sized bathrooms, powder rooms are more affordable to renovate, making it a great space to experiment. Budget-conscious approach the finish as you would a great outfit, looking at accessories and paint as your starting point. Or, your sanitary ware is the equivalent of a timeless, affordable shift dress or suit, with the pretty or accessories in this case tapware and trims – doing the styling.

Compact fittings are useful for small rooms, but try to do a hand wash tool feet to be sure you can comfortably use the basin without more water loading on the floor than in the sink. Lariandeh recommends CP Hart for a wide range of petite basins, and suggests that a concealed cistern often makes for a more solution in a smaller space, allowing for additional storage or an artwork recess above.

A small sink can be made interesting if it's scalloped – try Thomas Crapper & Co's Marlborough Basin Cloakroom Set, £694, while Strydams also recommends Rockingham's Carved Cloakroom Basin, £334, as a more affordable alternative: "The details make all the difference, so it's worth investing in the best brassware you can afford," she stresses. "It will last for years and the patina of the brass will get better over time."



Add curiosity, such as this Derby & Hornet cloakroom, to guests' visits | GROUP Interiors Limited

Every inch counts
Spatial planning is key. Hidden shelving units built into a niche behind the basin mirror is a great storage solution. If you've wallpapered your powder room, extending that finish to your shelves too will integrate the look and add an element of surprise when the mirror door is opened. Mirroring the full wall behind the basin is another clever way of creating the illusion of space.

Get decorative
Even if you've had a utilitarian approach, treat this room as you would any other in the house, by using fabric and vintage pieces. "Transforming an existing piece of furniture into a vanity or wash basin not only adds character but is also a sustainable choice," says interior designer Lauren Gilbertshaw. "Repurposing an antique dresser or vintage console table by adding a basin and wall taps can effortlessly blend the old with the new, achieving a personalised touch."

A budget-conscious and creative option is to forgo under-sink cabinetry and add a pretty sink skirt instead, an approach favoured by interior designer Sarah Tamworth, and one that works brilliantly if its colourway picks out the tones of woodwork or wallpaper. Don't forget some personal additions such as framed artwork and mementoes to really elevate the space.

A larger cloaker can feel generous for an eight-piece, as with this Derby & Hornet cloakroom

Light it right
For lighting, as with other rooms in the house, layering works best. A combination of wall lights, pendant and recessed lighting creates an inviting atmosphere, but at the very minimum, Ayrton-Gomez suggests that you should have a light on the ceiling or ceiling light, and have them on dimmers for flexibility. "We like to use glass or fabric shades if possible, to maximise ambient lighting while making sure that make-up can be touched up effectively if needed," says Hourigan. "And another tip is to always go for a bigger mirror than you think you need, as it feels generous in a small space."

In fact, that sense of largesse is key overall – one or two over-scaled pieces, an element that wows the eye and flattering lighting that makes your guests feel good is all you need to have the most covetable downstairs loo in town.

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