

NH**2007**
Bath of the Year

KELLY SMITH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN DURANT

LEFT: Nina sculpted the shower out of red-tinted mortar, which is much like concrete but made with a finer grain. Where the mortar cracked as it dried, Nina patched it with a soft-looking black grout. BELOW: Nina's artistic bathroom incorporates many unique elements made of reused items—such as a cotton swab holder made out of a dried gourd.

FAR BELOW: Homeowner Nina Karavasiles



The Art of the Bath

A California couple's off-the-grid home includes a bathroom that showcases its artist owner's handmade designs and recycled materials



The three-sided sink drains into the shower, eliminating the need for a second drain. The shower drains to a graywater system, which irrigates the yard.

California sculptor Nina Karavasiles' bathroom is more than a place to shower. The room is a handmade, artistic showcase of sustainable design and creativity.

Nina often installs her artwork in public places, where city governments and other groups dictate project specifications. So when she created her own bathroom, Nina gave herself permission to break free. "There's a lot of 'no' involved in public art," she explains. "So I gave myself a lot of 'yes.'"

In their solar-powered rural home, Nina and her husband, Scott Richards, incorporated green design and materials into the bathroom wherever possible. Nearly everything in the bathroom is reclaimed or handmade: The couple rescued the track lighting, which uses compact fluorescent bulbs, from a local theater that was being demolished; they bought mirrors from a local salvage store; and Nina installed a salvaged door she mounted with tempered decorative glass for a personalized touch. She made doorknobs from salvaged copper wire.

Nina also put her sculptor's hand to work throughout the room. She used clay and scrap metal from her sculpting to create the bathroom shelves. She fashioned the countertops and shower out of mortar, which is like concrete but made with a finer grain. Mortar cracks as it dries, but Nina solved that dilemma by applying black grout wherever it cracked, giving it a soft, moody feel. Nina sculpted the unique, three-sided sink—which drains directly into the shower then on to a graywater system—from clay, which she fired and glazed.

Crafting a sink is not a project for a beginner, Nina warns. Check with local community colleges and craft stores for pottery classes if you're interested in learning more. "It takes weeks to make a sink, let it dry and fire it," she says, "but I enjoy the challenge of making things most people have to buy." **NH**

THE CHALLENGE: Nina installed a composting toilet but soon discovered that its capacity was too small for even her two-person household. "We had a model intended for occasional use in a cabin, not as the main functioning toilet in our home," she says. The couple decided to remove the toilet from the house entirely and installed a larger Sun-Mar composting model in one of the home's many nearby outbuildings (www.Sun-Mar.com).

THE JOY: Incorporating the many quirky elements, such as the suspended gourd that holds cotton swabs, made the project fun. Inspired by organic gourds from a nearby farm, Nina liked the idea of using a common American Indian practice in a contemporary way: She cut a square opening in the gourd's side, removed the seeds, let it dry for two months and painted the inside.

THE COMPROMISE: Nina didn't use low-VOC paint on the walls, but says she would if she were to do again. She's working on creating her own paints for personal use.

OUR FAVORITE FEATURE: The ingenious design of the three-sided handmade sink allows water to run into the shower, eliminating the need for a second drain. The sink and shower both drain into a graywater system.

THE GOOD STUFF

SALVAGED DOOR: To let in more natural light, it's retrofitted with tempered glass. (Find a Habitat for Humanity ReStore near you: www.Habitat.org/env/restores.aspx.)

LIGHTING: Salvaged from a demolished theater, one set of lights runs on AC power and one on DC, so Nina and Scott can use lights without the solar inverter. (Solar energy is stored as DC power and converted to AC by an inverter; so this arrangement saves wear and tear on the solar inverter.)

STORAGE SHELVES: Nina sculpted these from scrap metal and glazed clay.

POURED CONCRETE FLOOR: Thermal mass keeps the floor cool in summer and warm in winter.

SINK AND SHOWER: Handmade from glazed clay, the shower drains into a gray-water system that irrigates the yard.