



The future's still white

Robin Levien is one of our most respected product designers. He's done a huge amount of work for Ideal Standard, and he talks to Abby Trow about how environmental issues are starting to impinge on bathroom design



While you may not know him by name, you almost certainly will know him by product. There's a very high likelihood you've used a loo designed by [Robin Levien](#), washed your hands in a basin designed by him and luxuriated in a bath designed by him. If you've found yourself in a bijou cloakroom or shower room, the clever mini-me sanitaryware may well be to his design. When it comes to bathrooms, Levien is your man.

As a designer, he always has an eye to the future, and the future has to be about sustainability as much as about technology, user-friendliness and aesthetics. So how sustainable can bathrooms be? Haven't they, after all, been promoted over recent years as pleasure domes in which to indulge and luxuriate under torrents of hot water? We've all been encouraged to invest in thumping power showers and huge baths. The environment hasn't featured heavily in their coverage.

'That's true. And I think the bathroom is tricky when it comes to being environmentally-friendly,' says London-based Levien. 'My feeling is that the thinking is focused too narrowly around saving-water. But I think we're on the nursery slopes of the sustainability argument and we need to go much further, by looking into the recyclability of the materials we use, developing new materials for bathroom products, and reducing the energy consumed by bathrooms.'

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Materials first then. Levien questions the wisdom of continuing to mass-produce baths made from acrylic with fibreglass backing. 'Their longevity isn't good and they can't be recycled. I am concerned about this,' he says. Nor is he convinced by solid surface materials (mineral-filled resins), which he doesn't think offer the durability of vitreous china. Which brings us neatly to the burning issue on everyone's lips when it comes to china, namely the huge amount of energy needed to fire the clay. 'Yes, very high temperatures are required but I'll say straight out that I don't feel guilty about working in ceramics, and I don't lie awake at night wishing there was something else to use.'

'That's because it has tremendous longevity and it doesn't degrade. If you compare after 10 years a ceramic basin and a mineral-filled resin basin, the former will be almost as good as the day it went in, whereas the latter won't. For basins and loos, I don't think there is, as yet, a better material.'

And Levien suggests there is something poetic about ceramic. 'It is in essence made from the earth's surface, silica, and if you put it back in the ground, it is going back to where it came from. Vitreous china doesn't decompose in the ground, but it is inert, it's not dangerous. And I go back to longevity...we're still digging up pieces of china in almost perfect condition that were made centuries ago.'

That said, Levien would like to see more wood being used in bathrooms, as well as recycled plastics being developed into hard-wearing, stable materials for use as bath panels, for example, and for baths themselves. 'I think we're still waiting for the perfect material for baths. Cast iron is

hard-wearing, but cast-iron foundries are still like Dante's Inferno.. and of course an iron bath requires four men to lift it.'

So he's not sure what materials will be the mainstay of the bathroom in 50 years' time, except that he'll wager the vitreous china loo will still be king in that department. 'The current economic climate isn't conducive to developing new environmentally-friendly materials, and while in my work, I can push clients to make better environmental choices, we need the whole of society to act together.'

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In the meantime, we come back to heat and water conservation as being issues we can all act on. 'Saving water is important. If you haven't got them already, fit thermostatic and water-saving taps. It's hard to get the right temperature for bath water using just a mixer tap and you still see people run the tap, then they put their toe in the bath, it's too hot, so the first thing they do is let out some of that hot water, and then add more cold water. They've spent money heating the water and they let it run down the drain before it's been used. It's ridiculous. A thermostatic tap will put a stop to that wasteful nonsense. And yes, you can retro-fit.'

Taps and showerheads which limit water flow are a very useful innovation, while we're seeing manufacturers turning their attention to the shape and size of baths. A typical bath takes 220 litres to fill it, whereas the Concept range from Ideal Standard, for example, has baths which are tapered at one end, so you get a good soak but in a mere 117 litres of water. And loos are available which flush with 3/4.5 litres of water, as opposed to the stand 4/6 litres.

Levien would like to see bathrooms that aren't bound together with kilograms of silicone mastic, which gets mouldy and is hard to keep clean: 'I want to see a more seamless, integrated approach to bathroom design. Presently we have lots of different elements made by different manufacturers, each with their own systems. I don't think that's very intelligent.' And greywater collection systems should become standard in housebuilding, so water from showers, basins and baths can be re-used to flush loos and water gardens, he asserts.

In the meantime, if you're renovating a bathroom, Levien advises you choose underfloor heating, install LED spotlights, and buy water-saving loos and taps. But before deciding to rip it out and start again, ask yourself whether your bathroom really does need root and branch replacement. A good squirt of Ecover and a lot of elbow grease, and that ceramic sink and enamelled bath should scrub up a treat.