Key points to check during a bathroom refurbishment for lasting results

Getting the basics right in a bathroom refurbishment

A bathroom renovation involves many moving parts, and getting the order wrong can lead to costly fixes later. Whether you're updating a small guest bathroom or reconfiguring a master suite, the sequence of work matters. A successful bathroom refurbishment balances careful planning with solid execution, especially around waterproofing, fixtures and airflow. These three areas are often where problems start, and they are also where good decisions pay off over the long term.

This article walks through the main points to check during a bathroom renovation, with a focus on the practical reasons behind each step. The goal is to help you understand what to look for and why certain choices matter more than others. While every project is different, the principles below apply to most residential bathrooms.

Waterproofing: the layer that protects everything else

Waterproofing is not a single product or step. It is a system that includes the substrate, the membrane, the corners, the joints and the way water is directed toward drains. A bathroom refurbishment that skimps on this part will almost certainly leak, and fixing leaks after tiles and fixtures are installed is expensive.

Check the substrate condition

The surface beneath the waterproofing layer must be sound. Old adhesive, loose plaster or uneven screed can prevent the membrane from bonding properly. Before any waterproofing is applied, the substrate should be clean, dry and free of dust. Any cracks or hollow spots need to be repaired. This step is sometimes overlooked when the existing tiles are removed quickly, but it is essential for a durable result.

Pay attention to corners and penetrations

Water tends to collect at internal corners and around pipe penetrations. These areas should receive extra attention during the waterproofing phase. Many modern systems use liquid-applied membranes that form a seamless layer, but they still rely on proper priming and correct application thickness. Reinforcing tape or fabric at corners can help prevent cracking as the building settles. Checking that these details are done correctly before tiling begins can save a lot of trouble later.

Test the fall to the drain

Floor drainage depends on the slope, or fall, of the screed. A shower floor needs enough tilt to guide water toward the drain without creating a noticeable slope underfoot. The standard is usually around 1.5 to 2 percent, but local building codes may vary. Before tiling, it is worth checking that the screed directs water properly. A simple water test can reveal low spots where puddles will form.

Floor drainage and shower waste placement

The position of the shower waste influences both the waterproofing layout and the final look of the bathroom. A centre drain often requires more fall adjustment than a linear drain placed at the edge of the shower area. Linear drains are becoming more common because they allow a single continuous slope and can be tiled over for a clean appearance. However, they need careful planning during the screeding stage.

Another consideration is the drain trap access. Some traps are built into the floor and require a removable tile or access panel for cleaning. If the trap is hidden under tiles, make sure there is a way to reach it without breaking the waterproofing. Small details like this affect long-term maintenance.

Wall tiling and its relationship with waterproofing

Tiles themselves are not waterproof. The grout and the substrate behind them handle moisture management. In wet areas such as showers, waterproofing should extend up the wall to at least the height of the showerhead, and sometimes higher if there is a ceiling riser or a steam feature. The tile choice matters too. Large-format tiles mean fewer grout lines, which reduces potential leak points, but they require a flatter substrate and more skill to install.

When selecting tiles for a bathroom refurbishment, consider the slip resistance of floor tiles. Polished porcelain can be dangerously slippery when wet. A matte or textured finish is safer in a bathroom environment. Wall tiles do not have the same slip requirement, but they should be easy to clean and resistant to moisture absorption.

Sanitaryware and fixture placement

The position of the toilet, basin and shower affects both the plumbing layout and the daily use of the space. Moving a toilet drain requires breaking into the slab or subfloor, which adds cost and complexity. Similarly, relocating a basin drain may involve chasing walls or rerouting pipes. During the planning stage, it helps to map out the existing plumbing and decide which fixtures can stay in place and which need to move.

Wall-hung toilets and basins are popular because they make cleaning easier and give a modern look. However, they require in-wall cisterns and sturdy framing. The supporting structure must be designed to carry the weight and to allow access to the cistern mechanism without damaging the wall finish. This kind of detail is best resolved before tiling begins.

Shower enclosures and their sealing

A shower enclosure is only as good as its seal. Sliding doors, hinged doors and fixed panels all rely on rubber seals or magnetic strips to keep water inside the shower area. Over time, these seals can wear out or collect dirt, so it is worth choosing a quality system with replaceable parts. The enclosure frame should be fixed to the wall after tiling, not before, so that the waterproofing layer is not punctured behind the tile.

Frameless glass enclosures are a popular choice because they look clean and let light pass through. They require thicker glass and precise hinges, and they depend on the wall being perfectly plumb. If the wall is out of level, the door may not close properly. Checking the wall flatness before ordering the enclosure can prevent fitting problems.

Ventilation and moisture control

A bathroom without good ventilation will develop mould, peeling paint and musty smells. Even the best waterproofing cannot compensate for stagnant humid air. The ventilation strategy should be part of the refurbishment plan from the start, not an afterthought.

An extractor fan is the most common solution, but its effectiveness depends on its extraction rate, ducting and placement. The fan should be installed as high as possible on the wall or in the ceiling, because warm moist air rises. Ducting that runs through a cold roof space can cause condensation inside the duct, so insulated ducting or a short straight run is preferable. Some fans include a humidistat that turns on automatically when moisture levels rise, which is a convenient feature.

Natural ventilation, such as an opening window, can supplement mechanical extraction. If the bathroom has no window, the extractor fan becomes the primary means of moisture removal. In that case, a continuous running fan or a timer switch can help keep air moving long after the shower is used.

Plumbing alterations and pressure testing

Any changes to the hot or cold water supply, or to the drainage pipes, should be pressure tested before the walls are closed up. A small leak behind a tiled wall can go unnoticed for weeks and cause significant damage. Pressure testing involves capping the pipes and

pressurising the system to check for drops. This is a standard step in professional work, and it is worth asking about during the refurbishment.

Old galvanised or polycop pipes may need replacement, especially if they are prone to corrosion or have restricted flow. Modern PEX or multi-layer pipes are flexible and resistant to scaling, and they reduce the number of joints required. Each joint is a potential leak point, so fewer joints mean lower risk.

Lighting and electrical safety

Bathrooms are classified as special electrical zones because of the presence of water. Light fittings, switches and sockets must be rated for their zone. In a shower area, only low-voltage fittings with a high ingress protection (IP) rating should be used. The electrical work should always be done by a qualified electrician who understands the local regulations.

Recessed downlights in a shower ceiling need to be sealed against moisture. Even if the light fitting is IP rated, steam can penetrate through gaps in the ceiling if the housing is not properly sealed. A simple gasket or silicone bead around the fitting can prevent this.

Good lighting also improves safety and usability. A combination of ambient light and task lighting around the mirror makes the bathroom more functional. Dimmable lights can create a softer atmosphere for bathing, but they still need to comply with zone requirements.

Putting it all together

A bathroom refurbishment that focuses on waterproofing, well-placed fixtures and effective ventilation will serve its users for years. The checklist above is not exhaustive, but it covers the areas where most problems arise. Paying attention to these points during the planning and construction phases helps avoid the common pitfalls that lead to repairs and replacements.

Thinking about these details as a system rather than a list of separate tasks makes the process clearer. Waterproofing supports the tiling, which supports the fixtures, and ventilation protects all of them from moisture damage. When each part is done properly, the result is a set of durable bathroom improvements that add comfort and value to the home.

Whether you are working with a contractor or managing the project yourself, knowing what to check gives you confidence in the decisions you make. The time spent on preparation and quality checks during the refurbishment is time saved later on maintenance and fixes. A well-planned bathroom is one that works quietly, looks good and stays dry for a long time.