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By Sapna Agarwal & Byravee Iyer



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Mumbai/Bangalore: Two months ago, a shopper walked into the FCML lifestyle retail store in New Delhi looking for a wash basin. He found one that he liked, with a price tag of Rs 2.5 crore, the price of a fairly large apartment in most parts of India. He took it.

That shopper is an extreme example, but most well-heeled homeowners are no longer leaving it to the plumber to decide what to do with the bathroom. They are lavishing as much attention on it as they would do on, say, the den or the home theatre.

"It's about having the same emotion that goes into making the living room, for the bathroom," said Abhinav Khandelwal, managing partner of FCML, which has stores in India's biggest cities, including several dedicated to high-end sanitaryware.

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For rich

customers with posh homes in Delhi, or a Rs 50 crore apartment in Mumbai, luxury is no longer just about indulging in Versace sofas, Fendi Casa calfskin couches, Swiss designer Alfredo Häberli's sofa for Moroso or an elegant chaise lounge stamped Made in Italy.

Such clients are also willing to spend up to Rs 1.5 crore on designing their bathrooms, according to Karthik Srinivasamurthy, managing partner, Style Box, a Bangalore-based multi-brand bathroom solutions store, which stocks luxury brands such as Sicis, Agape, THG and Toscoquattro.

Designing a high-end bathroom doesn't just involve picking a wash basin, a commode and a shower unit. Bathroom decor includes carpets, artifacts, console tables, art work, family photos and assorted greenery, besides entertainment in the form of iPod dock stations, speakers and television sets. Some shower units have temperature settings, offer massages and produce what's claimed to be mood-enhancing music.

Custom-designed products include handmade crystals embedded in the Lalique taps offered by THG, floors inlaid with semi-precious stones and gold and platinum basins. Then there is the branded designer look complete with bathtubs doubling up as installations, as with Audrey, a shoe-shaped bathtub by Sicis, or the free-standing bathtub and complementary bathroom range in the Pear collection designed by Patricia Urquiola for Agape. Home owners can also recreate the glamour of the 1930s with the ultra luxury Hayon collection by Jaime Hayon for Bisazza Bagno.

As with most such luxury segments, this one too offers a study in stark contrasts. More than half of India's households or 53.1% do not have access to even a basic toilet, according to the 2011 census data.

Luxury customers comprise just the top 1-2% of Indian households but the money spent on such purchases by them is 10 times that of the segment of consumers just below them, according to Salil Sadanandan, managing director of **Kohler India**, a subsidiary of the US-based Kohler Co. bathroom and kitchen fittings maker.

"People who invest in luxury apartments and/or villas are open to designing every aspect of their homes, including the bathrooms, aesthetically, to their personal tastes and brand preferences, with respect to luxurious fittings etc., and price is not an impediment for this," said Anjum Jung, managing partner, **Morph Design Co.**, Prestige Group.

Demand for such products exists across the country. A couple of months ago, for instance, Kohler India launched Numi, an advanced toilet costing Rs 6.5 lakh with features such as a seat warmer, foot warmer and a touch-screen remote control. When Kohler opened a showroom in Chennai in April, it immediately got bookings for the Numi from a customer whose house was still being constructed.

"The high-end luxury products market, with products like Numi, contributed to one-third of the company's revenues in India," said Sadanandan. The luxury segment is the fastest-growing segment for Kohler with growth of 40-50% annually.

The interest in bathroom decor is in line with international trends and reflective of the ways in which luxury hotels are making their bathrooms more appealing.

"As people travel and live in good hotels they appreciate the luxury and want it in their homes as well," said Sonu Abara, a Mumbai-based interior designer. It's now possible to cater to these demands as international brands such as Dornbracht, Gessi, Flaminia, Plavisdesign, GSG, Regia and Art Ceram are present in India, having entered over the past few years. Awareness and demand has also increased due to the launch of high-end interior design magazines in India.

Domus, an architecture and design magazine, was launched in India in November last year. In March, Condè Nast India launched *Architectural Digest*, dedicated to plush living spaces and aimed at people willing to invest a significant amount of money in their homes.

The growth in the segment has not only drawn overseas companies to India, they are also investing in growth in the country. Kohler, has, for instance invested \$100 million (Rs 560 crore) in India over the last five-six years.

FCML, which has four showrooms in Delhi and opened one in Bangalore recently, is also expanding into markets such as Hyderabad, Chandigarh and Chennai.

Indians are also attending design and furniture fairs besides visiting stores overseas.

"At the Milan Furniture Fair (in April), which largely caters to dealers and the design fraternity, there were at least a few hundred Indians making purchases," said Ashish Taneja, chief executive officer, Zolijns, a furniture boutique and design house. This equips the high spender with enough knowledge to negotiate and demand competitive international pricing.

Zolijns, which opened in India in 2010, has partnerships with companies such as Italy's Rapsel Spa, known for its contemporary design and innovative products for bathrooms.

Builders, however, are yet to fully capitalize on this trend. Over the years bathroom sizes have increased from 10% of the covered area to 20%. Yet even those who build high-end villas or apartments often ignore the bathroom space.

Builders typically set aside a paltry Rs 30,000 budget for bathrooms, said Surinder Singh, head of operations at the FCML showroom in Bangalore. Some buyers, such as one of his clients, are therefore instructing builders to leave the bathroom alone and taking on the design and execution.

Meanwhile, the overall luxury home decor segment is growing at 25% annually and is expected to touch \$2 billion by 2015, according to **Technopak Advisors Pvt. Ltd**, a Delhi-based retail consultancy firm.

The market is surging along with the rise of luxury housing projects in the last three to four years by builders such as DLF Ltd and Lodha Group.

"In the top seven cities, houses above Rs 5 crore or million dollar homes account for 30% of the housing market," said Om Ahuja, chief executive officer, residential services, Jones Lang LaSalle India.

For instance, buyers in the Sunteck Group's Signature Island project at Bandra-Kurla Complex in Mumbai are paying Rs 35,000-45,000 per sq. ft. Deals in the Rs 10-20 crore range are becoming common and transactions valued at Rs 50 crore are taking place every month or so, Ahuja said.