

## DESIGN &amp; DECORATING

THAT'S DEBATABLE

## Could a Wood Tub Woo You?

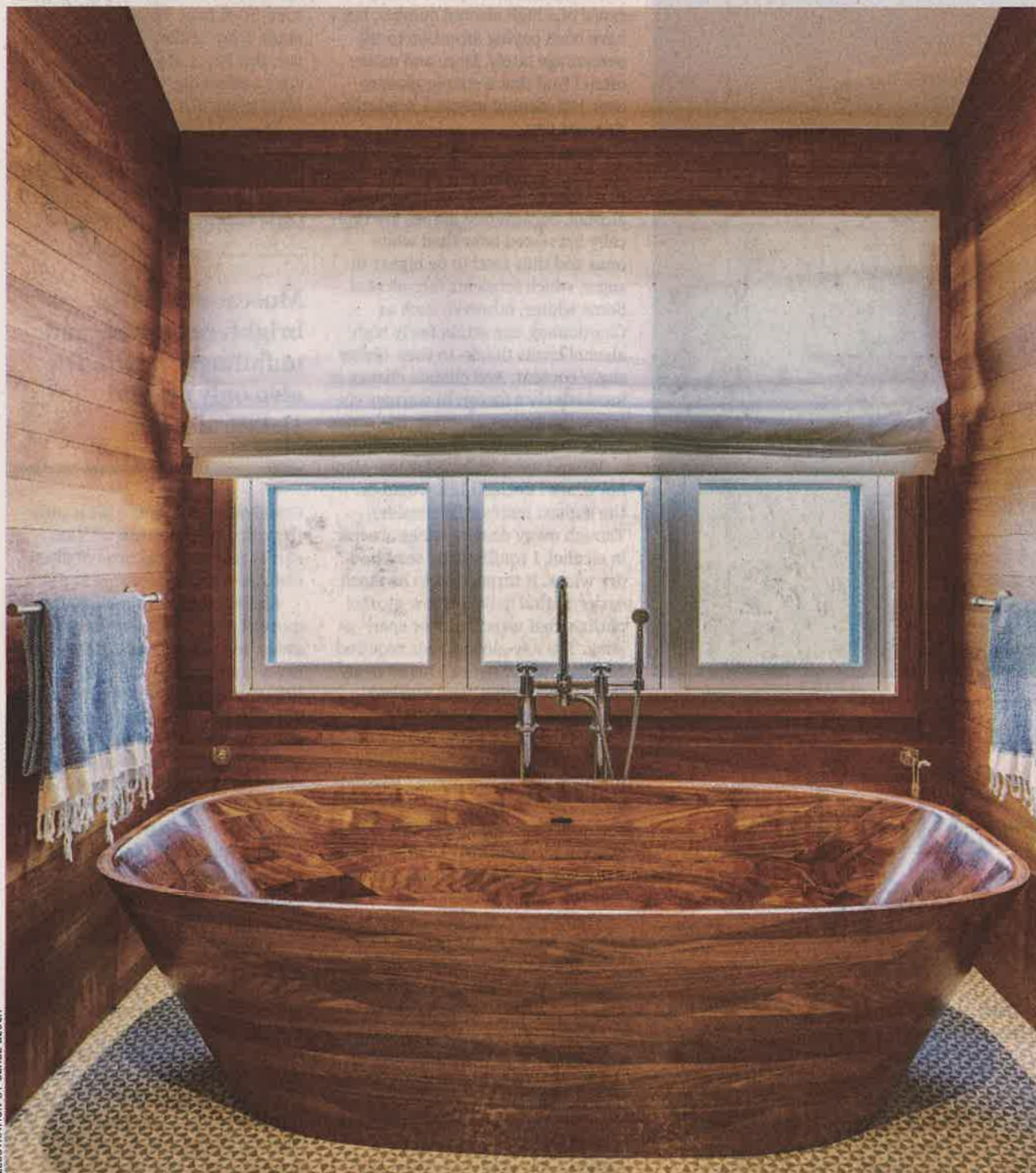


ILLUSTRATION BY SERGE BLOCH

**CHIC OR ICK?** In Sagaponack, N.Y., designer Joe Nahem installed a walnut tub from Nina Mair. "The client loved it," he said. Inset: Beyond Classic Tub (in photo illustration), from about \$13,493, e-legno, 39-03-3115-86671

YES

**INTRODUCING** soothing wood in a room of hard, shiny materials like porcelain and polished metals is a lovely old trick. Why not the tub? The earthy colors and irregular grain would warm up and customize a traditionally sterile space, said New York interior designer Gia Sharp approvingly. Tina Ramchandani, a fellow New York designer, also said she'd welcome a lumber tub: "Bathing in a natural element such as wood is more inviting and luxurious than cold ceramic." It doesn't hurt that this visually comforting material is literally toasty too. "Wood retains heat longer, so wood tubs are perfect for lingering in and melting stress

knots," said Ms. Sharp. Newbreed wood tubs (this year's International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York featured two) are influenced less by the traditional Japanese *ofuro*—defined by high, thin walls and a built-in seat—and more by dugout canoes and vintage clawfoots. (Witness, for example, the sensuous curves and sprawling dimensions of the cedar soaker inset above, from Italian manufacturer e-legno). Still, Japanese bathing culture, with roots in Buddhist purification rituals, remains relevant. "The idea of bath as spa is not new, but a wood tub evokes bathing as a spiritual experience," said architect John Ike of San Francisco's Ike Kligerman Barkley, who installed one in a Richmond, Calif., project.

NO

**QUITE A FEW** designers drew unflattering analogies when it came to tree-sourced tubs. Britt Zunino of New York's Studio DB compared soaking in an oval style to "bathing in a salad bowl." Jason Oliver Nixon, of Madcap Cottage in High Point, N.C., pronounced rectangular versions "too coffin-like." Other designers recalled the tacky hot-tub era. "They're reminiscent of a ski lodge in Tahoe with shag carpeting, circa 1976," said New York's Starrett Hoyt Ringbom. Even designer Eve Robinson, who included a wooden tub in a minimalist Scarsdale, N.Y., interior, cautions that you need to balance dark, heavy timber with pale colors

and plenty of light, open space. As for wood's potentially unsanitary nature, contemporary tub makers seal surfaces with hardeners, resin and epoxy. ("There's no sliminess or leakage," said Taylor Ross, founder of WaterWood Tubbs in Beebe, Ark. "It's just like sitting in an acrylic tub.") Still, many people squeamishly quail at the prospect of a bath made of naturally porous material. For example, Allison Babcock, a designer in Sag Harbor, N.Y., wanted an *ofuro* until she lived with one in France. "It was slimy and cracked and broke halfway through the winter," she recalled. "While wood-tub design has progressed by leaps and bounds, I cannot shake those memories." —*Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell*

