

Shower Handle or Rocket Ship Controls

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Thesis: Taking a shower is a quick and easy human task and faucets should be designed with that in mind yet some need a manual. I'm going to analysis what make a shower faucet good and bad design.

Audience: social commentary for anyone who's showered somewhere other than their house will be entertained by specifically design nerds.

We've all been there. Whether at a friend's house or a hotel, when you go to take a shower and before getting in you have to take a step back and figure out how to even turn it on. You start trial and error and it's even more complicated when you can't figure out how to turn the tub off so the shower head goes on. Nobody wants to be standing naked in a foreign bathroom fidgeting with a shower handle, the scariest naked and afraid. I'm here to analyze these shower handles and talk about what makes a good design that's easy to figure out versus one that leaves you in that uncomfortable situation. Showering should be a calm and cleansing experience and starting it off with confusion is purely due to bad design.

Before discussing specifics it's important to talk about some aspects of handles that are intuitive. First things first, we all know that counter clockwise is how to turn the water on and the further you turn it the hotter the water gets. Unless you get a bad plumber that's a whole other horror story. We all learned righty tighty lefty loosey in first grade right (or what nerds call experiential mapping). We also learned, if there is a color indication, red is hot and blue is cold. Another thing that is pretty intuitive is that pulling a handle out means turning it on and in means turning it off. I also wanted to mention that when it comes to shower handles there is always large room for user error. The worst thing to come out of it is getting wet unintentionally, but other than that a lot of trial and error can take place without any concern for damaging the handle. I mean at least I hope not. I don't know how aggressive you are with your shower handles.

When it comes to shower handles and how good or bad their design is, there are two different processes the user has when interacting with them. The hardest part is learning how to use it and figuring out how to get it exactly as you want it. With a good design that is the extent of your difficulty and after that you just turn the handle to where you want it every time and hop in the shower. However, that isn't always the case. Some shower handles have too many different controls that it can be a long process to turn on and get the right temperature everytime. When talking about user and usability in design it's important to make a design simple for a simple task and a more intricate design for a more complex task. In this case turning on a shower is super simple. All you want is for the shower to turn on and be at the temperature you want. Because there are two goals there should be two tasks. One to change the temperature and one to turn the tub to the shower all the way off and on. I mean nobody's using half the tub and half the shower that's a waste of water. Also, in this case neither of them can be automated, it would be nice to press a button and get the water temperature to turn to the exact degree you want but most people don't have that kinda money. Especially when you're like me living in an old college house that hasn't been renovated in decades.

To give an example of bad design I'll start off with my shower handles that will absolutely be the death of me. Here's a picture of it. They don't pull, only twist, and at first glance there is no signal of what is what. When it comes to mapping there are notches on the handles to indicate turning and it follows the left to right temperature change. However, it has low affordance. It's confusing to know what the middle handle does until the water is on and you turn it and realize it turns off the tub.



However, its design look doesn't correlate with its intended purpose. Just looking at it I would assume it would either change water pressure or turn on a different shower head or something. Additionally, knobs

in general are horrible for people with disabilities who aren't able to turn things with their wrist and forearms which decreases its usability.

Now when you actually know what all the handles do, the far right turns on cold water, the middle changes the tub to the shower, and the left turns on hot water, there are some constraints. When you get to the highest amount of water you can't turn it any more and when it's off you also can't turn it anymore in the other direction. There is zero consistency with the temperature because there are two controls for temperature so it is very hard to get the same temperature every time. Especially considering there are no arrows to indicate how far turned each knob is so I have to guess every time. Then the first five minutes of the shower I'm fiddling with the cold faucet to find the perfect temperature. This process is also drawn out because there isn't immediate temperature change (feedback) so I have to move it a little and wait a minute or two and then keep trying until it's exactly how I want it. It really is a huge pain.

In my house I live with six girls so we have two showers. When there was a huge pipe leak in my

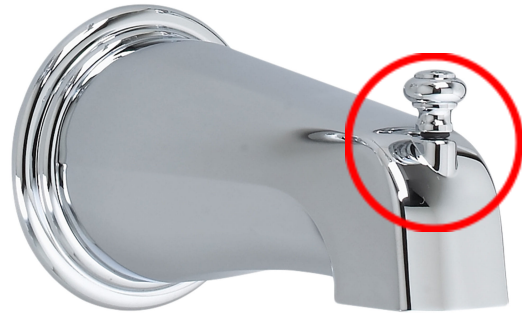


downstairs bathroom I had to use the upstairs shower. I thought my shower handle was bad, but theirs wasn't designed that much better. Here's a picture of it. It was obvious to me at first glance how to change the temperature as there is a small handle on the big handle that turns and has a red and blue line on it. And after turning the larger handle I knew it was to change the water pressure. Which if I took a bath might be nice, but I'm not really a bath person. The confusing part was how to turn the tub off. I may have thought about turning the mouth of the faucet which was spinning but didn't do anything. And my roommates weren't home at the time so

I sat there for five or ten minutes trying to figure it out. I eventually gave up and had to look up the make and model to figure it out. It turns out you have to pull down the spout at the bottom of the faucet kind of

hard to get it to change to a shower. Maybe I'm just a little slow but I feel like the affordances should be a bit more clear.

When you turn on a shower you are usually standing making it so you are looking down at the faucet. In a good design this should be kept in mind and the mechanism needed to be used should be visible from that vantage point. Like this. Although it was probably done this way to make it look more sleek from an interior design perspective, a faucet is a functional tool so usability design should supersede aesthetic design.



The last handle/faucet combo is one I feel does everything right. It's located in my friend's apartment and it is what I feel makes the most sense.

Like I mentioned before it has a tab to pull from the top which is a great affordance. Because the goal is to plug the tub and make the water go up to the shower head so you pull it up. Additionally, when looking at the handle for the water it doesn't move forward and backward but it does move counterclockwise/ clockwise.

To get a closer view you can see it has labels that are both aesthetically pleasing and informative. It



shows where the off position is and an arrow indicates which direction to turn it. Which leaves the user with less thinking and more doing. It also has a labeling of H and C for hot and cold so if you didn't already know now you know which end is which. Small things like this are crucial for making a good design of a simple task. The less a person has to problem solve and can just do the better. Another nice thing about this layout is that the constraints are clear. When the nozzle is pointing to the off it can't move further clockwise past it. Then, when moving it counterclockwise when you hit the C the cold water turns on. The water gets increasingly hotter as you move toward the H and when you hit the H it is the hottest the water can be and can't be turned anymore.