



## Interview

Jens J. Wischmann: "The bathroom is becoming green, smart and multifunctional. And ISH digital 2021 will be the first in a new generation of trade fairs."

**Frankfurt am Main, 26 February 2021. What is the mainspring of the industry in this situation, characterised by contradictions as it is? Economic collapse on the one hand, a surge in renovation on the other; social deprivation versus increasing media culture, in which new ideas for your house and photographs of stylish homes are exchanged; spruce houses or apartments in which, apart from video visitors, no guests are expected, and sports enthusiasts who do their training in front of mirrors. What does this all mean for the bathroom? Lawyer Jens J. Wischmann, Managing Director of the Association of the German Sanitary Industry (VDS) and joint founder of the trend platform Pop up my Bathroom, sets out the three most important trends in bathroom design, discusses hygiene in the bathroom, the coming surge in renovation for private bathrooms, and what he hopes ISH digital 2021 will bring.**



Jens J. Wischmann, Managing Director, Association of the German Sanitary Industry (VDS)  
Source: Association of the German Sanitary Industry / Karsten Jipp

**Mr. Wischmann, how do you view the current economic situation in the sanitary industry?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* For self-evident reasons, the home is now the focal point of our lives. Even if living and where we live formed a major topic before the pandemic, now it has

gained in importance again: people are investing in their homes, renovating them, working at do-it-yourself, creating a fine living space. The popularity of the subject means that the bathroom is becoming an increasing object of attraction. More and more, it is seen as a fully recreational room – with all associated expectations by way of aesthetic design and convenient fittings and furnishings. The major importance of the living environment for quality of life in the private sphere is certainly a driving force for the good to very good economic state of the sanitary industry in Germany. The bathroom is becoming a pleasant retreat within one's own four walls and is enjoying an enormous upgrade through higher-quality furnishings.

**On the other hand, the industry still needs to counterbalance restrictions, too – is that not the case?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Given the excellent conditions in the market, the challenges faced by the trade come principally from the thin nature of the workforce, with hardly any reserves, not least because for years we have had a problem when it comes to recruiting new entrants to the industry. Of course those of our member businesses which are strongly export-focused have also been hit quite directly by the global consequences of the pandemic for the economy – so far, however, with a manageable fall in sales. So, as a leading trade fair, ISH would have been just right in its timing and would have provided new incentives in this stage of the pandemic. But I firmly expect to see these incentives to come equally from the purely digital ISH digital 2021 – even if certainly not to the same extent.

**You use Pop up my Bathroom at ISH to pick on the relevant bathroom trends. So has a lot happened over the last two years?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Of course we want to reflect current trends in style and to promote new developments, but our priority aim has always been to identify and spotlight longer-term developments early on. And yes, a lot *has* happened over the last two years. These are exciting times and sanitary businesses need to respond to social changes and general conditions – for instance in the form of new products and concepts. Through Pop up my Bathroom we are attempting to launch incentives and to shift the focus onto major developments in the bathroom. In this process a number of trends are intertwined. One result of this, for instance, is the private spa – a major trend, which we analysed, designated and communicated twelve years ago at ISH 2009.

**In Pop up my Bathroom how do you estimate current trends, and what messages do you have for the industry and for the general public?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* At the moment we are seeing three dominant bathroom trends and two trend drivers. .Green Bathroom, .Smart Bathroom and .Living Bathroom describe the developments determining the design and equipment of the bathroom of the future, because in the first place consumers want to invest in an environmentally-aware and value-oriented way, secondly smart technology is setting new standards in hygiene, convenience and the nature of the bathroom experience, and thirdly people have higher quality expectations which a bathroom must fulfil as a place to spend time in and higher expectations of its potential uses, as a relaxing private spa and healthcare zone. While the trend towards the .Living Bathroom is becoming more important again through the general experience of the pandemic and the increasing regard paid to house and home which has resulted, I would point to two drivers – the growing awareness of hygiene and the backlog of renovation needed by private bathrooms and (semi-public) sanitary facilities – which are

industry-specific and are likely to impact on market shares to the benefit of the respective product segments. Loads of old bathrooms are waiting to be given a new life. And of course the pandemic is also closely involved in the subject of bathrooms and is making people more aware of questions of hygiene.

**At the last ISH the trend forum Pop up my Bathroom attempted to win the industry over to the rising topic of a more daring coloration – and was very successful in doing so. What motto have you taken as your prime statement this year?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* We are taking up a development which is attractive both to the trade and to consumers – especially to clients who want renovation. Actually this development is not new, but rather in the last few years it has been working unobtrusively in the background and is now having a major impact on the layout of bathrooms and on product design: Increasingly, "front of wall" products are undergoing a symbiosis with "rear of wall" products – we call it "inside | outside." Using this motto we shall also be showcasing the three bathroom trends at ISH digital 2021. For this subject is not only becoming more and more important for the development of the industry, but it also shows how closely design and trade businesses, lifestyle and technology go hand in hand.

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## Hygiene

**The pandemic has given the question of hygiene in private bathrooms a new importance: is there a hygiene problem in the bathroom?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Current developments have meant that awareness of cleanliness and safety has significantly increased. Solutions for this question are already available on the part of industry. So, as far as hygiene is concerned, we don't need to reinvent the bathroom. The bathroom is one of the cleanest rooms in the house anyway. This is due to the surfaces and modern products which are all part of today's modern standards.

**Nevertheless, can we see an increased need for hygiene in the bathroom?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Naturally, in the pandemic we are washing our hands 7-12 times a day. So in matters of hygiene the private bathroom fulfils a major function – particularly in times of home office and home schooling, during which more members of the family use the bathroom all day long than they otherwise would. Given the repeated prevalence of humidity and heat, to prevent creating a breeding ground for germs and bacteria, along with modern equipment, maintenance and simple rules of behaviour such as good ventilation also play their part. Touchless taps or dispensers are now becoming more important for private bathrooms, too.

**You emphasise the increasing importance of hygiene measures in private bathrooms – does the trend in public facilities show any differences?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* In public and semi-public areas the question of hygiene is currently of even greater relevance. The pandemic has ultimately made us aware on all sides. The hospitality industry must develop new hygiene concepts, and many sanitary installations for office premises, event locations or public places must be adapted and modified to reflect

increased demands. The sanitary industry offers a wide range of solutions for the public and semi-public area, too.

### **What impact is this having on the sanitary industry?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* At ISH digital 2021 I expect to see further new hygiene products and hygiene services. Water-bearing hygiene products in the bathroom represent a growth market. Plus the fact that sustainability is an aspect already included in many of the hygiene sanitary products.

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### **Renovation**

#### **Renovation seems to be a major topic in the German-speaking countries – you have even spoken of a surge in renovation.**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Over the next few years the real-estate market will be seeing a prolonged surge in renovations. In Germany renovation of bathrooms comes at the very top of these planned renovation works. Our survey has shown that 16.7 million Germans intend to invest in their bathrooms before long. 6.2 million Germans are even planning a general overhaul. Moreover the pandemic is operating as a catalyst. The home is becoming ever more important. Given this backdrop, the industry's leading international trade fair, ISH digital 2021 in Frankfurt, will be of particular importance. I think we shall also see a number of new developments which will contribute to simplifying bathroom renovation.

#### **What motivation do apartment or house owners have in renovating their bathrooms?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Builders' clients who for nearly 20 years have scarcely invested any capital in their own bathrooms are benefiting now from the enormous technological development in sanitary products which has taken place over the last few years. In such a renovation process these properties will therefore not only come to participate in the modern standard of a lifestyle-based bathroom architecture; they will also be able to enjoy innovative bathroom products – such as shower WCs, or a spacious, floor-level shower. The concrete added value which this work brings can certainly contribute to an increase in the property's value.

#### **The VDS is calling for a new approach to severely outmoded bathrooms on the part of the decision makers, housing associations and landlords. What do you mean by that?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* In rented properties bathroom renovations frequently cover only what is absolutely necessary. Often the landlords are put off by the capital-investment costs or potential loss of rents. Yet a bathroom renovation represents financial input to the maintenance of a property's value like no other modernisation measure.

#### **But it is not just in private bathrooms that renovation would need to come. Parents of schoolchildren will be glad to see that the VDS is also calling for the modernisation of toilets in educational institutions.**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Going to the toilet, and then washing your hands, is a basic human need, which we in our highly developed industrial country must also recognise. Some of the

conditions in German schools, kindergartens and universities are dreadful. A change of course on the part of those responsible is absolutely necessary.

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## **.Green Bathroom**

**At ISH digital 2021 you are spotlighting three major trends. What do you mean by a ".Green Bathroom"?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Well, up to now few bathroom designers have moved sustainability more strongly to the forefront of this sales process. Yet, the sanitary industry has been offering sustainable product solutions in the bathroom for a long time. There is a whole host of water-saving fixtures which do not sacrifice convenience, cleansing-friendly WCs which, by means of an innovative flushing technology without a rim, help to reduce the amount of cleansing materials needed, plus shower WCs, which save toilet paper by cleansing with water. Environmental awareness hasn't just risen to the top as a result of the coronavirus pandemic – the desire for ecologically sustainable construction has long been a genuine preoccupation among many builders' clients. Now that high design expectations have been established over the last few years, the .Green Bathroom will develop into the next fixed standard.

**So you see a greater potential for ".Green Bathroom" as a subject for communication by the sanitary industry?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Yes. Moreover is it very good for marking yourself off from your competitors. If you put the focus on sustainability in bathroom design, you don't just set the client's imagination running wild; you can also score with hard facts. If you incorporate bathroom design early on in the architectural concept, the ".Green Bathroom" can be realised in a much more consistent and attractive way, for instance by linking the bathroom directly with the garden or by orienting the bathroom towards the preferred position of the sun. When presenting the tender and design, a list can be made of sustainable aspects. At this point, using innovative story-telling, the trade supplier can mark himself off from his competitors, particularly from those trading online.

**Will all bathrooms now go green?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Plants in the bathroom are a great idea, but they don't make a green bathroom. To make a green bathroom you need sustainable solutions with long-term effects. Just as with the private spa, it needs a designer who develops holistic bathroom designs under the aspect of sustainability. Here too I see a major growth market.

**Will the desire for sustainability change the bathroom?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Definitely. We shall soon be seeing a sort of ecological package insert coming to bathrooms. Credibility will be the biggest asset here, because evaluating sustainable action or sustainable production is so complex. Transparency alone will not help in this; the standards achieved must also be communicable. Certificates, such as the Blue Angel, FSC or PEFC, plus the sustainability reports by the sanitary companies, can provide orientation here.

## **Is there not a danger that in many "green" bathrooms it will just be a case of "green whitewashing"?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* As long as you communicate honestly and don't make too much fuss, this charge can bear no weight. What you need is a sense of proportion and a respect for facts. The industry has already established a good basis, in the shape of its Blue Responsibility Initiative. But of course you are not wrong: on the producer side a certain respect for the subject is becoming evident, precisely because they know how properly aware consumers respond to "green whitewashing." If, for example, companies have already firmly established sustainability as an integral part of their corporate philosophy over a long period, of course that pays dividends in terms of credibility. I am quite sure that many sanitary businesses will follow this example, since decisions to purchase will be guided more closely in future by the sustainability profile. This applies also to the whole three-stage sales channel. Trade and retail will need to make the same contribution to this subject.

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## **.Living Bathroom**

**The bathroom is becoming more a part of the home – this development is not new. Why have you taken up ".Living Bathroom" as a top trend for bathrooms in your 2021 campaign for Pop up my Bathroom?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* At ISH digital 2021 we have restricted ourselves to three trends – we are setting out the three most important trends which will be with us over the next few years and which will have a major impact on bathroom design. Even if, for industry insiders, bathroom upgrading nowadays may be a matter of course not needing a great deal of discussion, still the evolution which the bathroom, as a room, needs to undergo is a pretty large one for many. For this relatively short time it seems to many end customers almost like a small revolution. People will first really have to get used to it. It is not so long ago that rented-apartment blocks had WCs per floor, and now we are speaking of a lifestyle bathroom with a high quality of fittings and furnishings, a quality space to spend time in. The .Living Bathroom trend will probably be the most important catalyst for sales growth in retail, trade and industry – and not just in the domestic market, but also in international markets. High-quality design and innovative technologies "made in Germany" for the private spa will quite certainly be hits for export.

**So what should a ".Living Bathroom" consist of?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* In a home-oriented bathroom, bathroom furniture will not only assume an optical function but will at the same time ensure sufficient storage room. The .Living Bathroom must offer plenty of space for decoration. Its interior design will borrow design factors from the remainder of the home: plenty of fabrics, warm wood tones, plus seats and accessories will give the bathroom a home character. Perhaps there will be a carpet on the floor, perhaps a bench or chair will attract you to spend a little time there, and a professional lighting design will accompany the user from his or her stimulating morning toilette to their emotional relaxation in the evening. The experience of the pandemic has made the function of the bathroom even more important as a retreat zone, and the extension of the bathroom's function as a room in which you can train and maintain health and fitness appears attractive to many people, in view of reduced opportunities for exercise

and contacts with training partners. That runs from a normal ergometer to online training on a spinning bike, from the exercise mat to a smart workout mirror. The more space I have for sitting down or a training appliance, the more the ".Living Bathroom" will become a true living space.

**At ISH 2019 the trend forum Pop up my Bathroom hit the spirit of the age for the industry with its motto "Colour Bathroom." Is colour in the bathroom still a topic? And which colours are determining bathroom design at the moment?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Colour in the bathroom is a topic as contemporary as never before. ISH 2019 triggered a true colour campaign in the bathroom. In these times of corona virus a comfortable home for living is in particular demand. So it is plausible to suppose that the pandemic is impacting on the range of colours in the bathroom. Beige tones convey not only a natural environment, but also homeliness. So it is no surprise that more and more bathrooms are designed in beige tones – if we once discount the ever-prevailing white. With beige as a basic colour, greige – still completely predominant two years ago – shifts up one key into the homely range, since it invokes more clearly the brown hues familiar from the rest of the living area.

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## **.Smart Bathroom**

**The bathroom is becoming more digital. How is the ".Smart Bathroom" trend to be classified?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* The networking of products and appliances in the home environment is a growth market world-wide. Along with the digitalisation of building and security technology in the private home, the kitchen and bathroom are highly suitable for integrating existing products into the network – though always with a view of optimising convenience for the bathroom user. I see increased digitalisation coming in the bathroom over the next few years.

**What will a ".Smart Bathroom" be like?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* The principle of smart applications in the home is based on networking applications and digitalising routines. Thus even today it is possible to call up your individual shower program to start your day – each member of the family will be able to adjust the degree and intensity of the water applications via a profile of their own. When it comes to shower WCs, the level of digitalisation is already very high. A click on the app is all it takes to activate and operate many shower WCs. Mirror cabinets will take over smart functions for purposes of light design in the bathroom and simulate major functions in the course of the day via the temperature of the light. And touchless taps are becoming increasingly popular in private bathrooms, too. The manufacturers of taps and other fittings are really far advanced in their developments for the bathroom. Today the automated filling of a bathtub or a shower underpinned by multimedia is no longer a mere futuristic vision. Water at the touch of a button is the trend of the hour in the .Smart Bathroom.

**What is the current state of development of smart applications in the bathroom?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* I think at ISH digital 2021 we shall be seeing a further level of digitalisation in new products. First on the list will come the simplification of daily applications for the bathroom user. We shall also be seeing more and more interfaces which will provide the trade with facilities for maintenance. Of course this smart technology appeals particularly to technology-conversant users, but the sanitary manufacturers are working above all on smart usages to simplify life in the bathroom. Smart products are intended to raise the quality of the time you spend in the bathroom. This will also benefit older people, for instance, who will be able to remain independent for longer. I am thinking in particular of a support through ergonomic products: products whose height can be raised or lowered, better lighting, heating, fitness, water at the touch of a button, or an increase in the hygiene standard through a shower WC.

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## **ISH and Pop up my Bathroom**

### **What is your assessment of the coming ISH digital 2021?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Digital formats cannot replace physical experience in the long run. After a year or more, with no actual exhibitor presence at trade fairs, we can see that already. I think it is important, despite the pandemic, to stick to this year's fair date – after all, ISH is not only a national event; it is a leading international trade fair. Here, for more than 60 years, a whole industry meets to do business, to provide mutual inspiration, to fix benchmarks, and to supply further training. A trade fair's digital platform will certainly not be able to reproduce completely all functions, but in the history of ISH we shall be quite definitely experiencing the evolutionary launch of a new generation of trade fair. Both Messe Frankfurt and the industry will benefit from this experience, and over the next few years ISH will undergo a transformation, becoming an innovative hybrid leading international trade fair: wholly to the advantage of visitors and exhibitors.

### **Are you satisfied with the level of registrations by your partners from the bathroom-experience world for ISH digital 2021?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* No, there could certainly be more. Some market players will not be there, unfortunately. Even if the economic situation for many German sanitary brands is positive due to an increased demand in the home market, a commitment as an exhibitor to ISH digital 2021 is linked with numerous benefits. Moreover ISH digital 2021 is a clear investment in confirming ISH as a leading international trade fair. German sanitary brands benefit from the location and the reputation of ISH over the whole world. Without ISH as a shop window, many German companies would not be where they are now: ISH as a trade fair, and a presence there even if it is "only" being held digitally, is thus also an expression of the leading role performed by a whole industry. But I can also understand that individual reasons are involved in rejecting attendance. Shortly however we shall be seeing that the level of registrations is increasing from day to day – the opportunity to visit at short notice is definitely one of the advantages of the digital format.

### **And what will the future be for trade fairs and ISH?**

*Jens J. Wischmann:* Given normal conditions of travel by the decision makers in the industry, which are to be expected with the increasing level of vaccination and a decline in the infection, over the next ten years trade fairs will gain in overall importance. A video



meeting is no substitute for a trade fair. A trade fair is when a project developer from Dubai finds the free-standing bathtub for his 1,200 units at ISH and a bathroom designer, touring the halls, discovers the latest developments for his own business. The need for trade fairs is something recognised and accepted by all market partners – world-wide. I think the importance of trade fairs will grow considerably in people's perception and become once again an integral part of the marketing plan. So I am already looking forward to a hybrid ISH 2023 in Frankfurt – for five days we shall be together, celebrating a party for the industry!

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\* preliminary figures 2020