

The Ups and Downs of Stairs **Part Two -- The Beauty and Function of Stairs**

The building code outlines some key requirements that make a stair functionally workable. Although a stair may meet all code requirements, it may not function well. Code compliance certainly doesn't guarantee a beautiful stair!

Location of the stair is critical in your home's design. Traditionally, the stairs to a second floor are located in an entry hall, usually within sight of the front door. (Note that Feng Shui, rooted in ancient Chinese lore, says "good luck" will roll down a stair pointed toward the entry and right out the door.)

Stairs are like a piece of sculpture when located in a prominent spot and demand a high degree of craftsmanship and finish. This can easily double the cost of a stair and take it way beyond just a practical means of getting from one floor to another. At the height of the stair design scale are the large sweeping, curved stairs with ornate balustrades, volutes and turnouts. In most of our more modest homes, these grand stairs would look ridiculously out of place.

Not surprisingly, they also wouldn't fit into most budgets (they range in cost from \$8,000 to \$20,000 or more). Contemporary glass railings, curved stairs, stone balustrades, and other exotic accessories could push the cost even higher. Let's call these grand stairs a 3 on a scale of 3. They are free standing, independent, sculptural elements that represent huge investments. They also require large amounts of space and a grand setting to fit into.

A class "2" stair would be one that would take some of the elements of a class 3 stair and marry them to a more modest budget and program. This is the class of stair found in many houses originally built as two story homes up until the 1940's. This is the most

appropriate class of stair for most two-story additions. These stairs are always at least partially open on one side, allowing the use of a decorative balustrade. The balustrade can be of wood or wrought iron (true wrought iron that is, not the cheap, flimsy tubular metal stuff associated with inexpensive porch railings). One very classic motif is a painted wood riser, naturally finished oak treads, painted balustrades, and an oak, "mushroom" shaped handrail. There are obviously many variations, but this is the most common stair in homes built originally in the 1930's.

At the lowest end of the stair design scale are steep and utilitarian stairs. In some homes this type of stair leads to basements and attics. In homes from the 1940's to the 1970's, however, these very modest stairs were used for main floor access. Often, they do not have proper landings at the top and bottom. They also have handrails mounted on one side only, and they are relatively steep and narrow. They might have a very small open portion at the top or bottom with some balustrades, but it is minimal at best. Often, the treads will be carpeted (which saves dollars), or sometimes just the center portion will be carpeted with small pieces of hardwood on each side to create the illusion of a carpeted runner over a hardwood tread.

These stairs rarely look good in the entry area of an older home, although they can work effectively in a secondary stair location, such as off a hallway or even in a family room. Type 2 stairs cost from \$2,500 to \$5,000, while a type 1 stair would cost as little as \$500.

Sometimes, in some larger homes there are two stairs, the back stair being more modest in scale and detail and originally intended for maids or service personnel. In fact, that stair ends up in a convenient location, typically off of a back hallway, pantry or kitchen area, ideal for day-to-day use by modern families.

Two stairs are common in the larger homes in the Fabulous 40's in East Sacramento. Some new homes incorporate this secondary stair, especially when square footage is over about 3,500 square feet.

story house from an aesthetic and functional standpoint. They are surprisingly complicated and expensive. Whether your stair is grand or modest, it needs careful design and execution to be a successful "people mover!"

Copyright 1997 Michael F. Malinowski, AIA