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THE STAIRCASE AS AN ART FORM



THE STEPS IN YOUR HOME CAN CREATE A DESIGN MOMENT—AS SOON AS YOU WALK INSIDE

Though its original purpose was purely functional, a staircase, in its most artful form, can become an inspired focal point, acting as an architectural sculpture. “A staircase is often the first thing you see when you enter a property. So, naturally, if it’s a beautiful amalgam of craftsmanship and engineering, it’s going to make a great first impression and set the tone for the rest of the house,” says Ed O’Donnell, creative director and co-founder of Angel O’Donnell, based in London.

It’s the opportunity to create a design moment. “We always seek to turn the staircase back into a statement that underpins our design ethos for the project,” says Sam McNally, co-founder and design director of London-based Echlin. “We want to celebrate every square inch in our homes. Staircases are a great place to flex our design muscles, to impress guests, and to make everyday use a pleasure for users.”

The steps to inspired stairs start with know-how.

CREATIVITY BY DESIGN

“You want the staircase to stand out by blending in, seamlessly ascending or descending through a home,” McNally says. “We often arrive at a helical design as it feels more organic than spiral; it’s less tightly wound than a circular form. That said, a lot of our plan forms are rectilinear to make the most efficient use of space, so straight runs can work well, too.”

An open tread floating staircase can seamlessly connect the house and lend a feeling of lightness, says Sarah Jefferys, founder of Sarah Jefferys Architecture + Interiors in New York. You can also use glass to create the illusion of floating stairs with striking bronze hinges to hold the elements together, said Carleton Varney, president of Dorothy Draper in Palm Beach, Fla., in an interview a few months before his death in July. The stairs are typically lit from underneath and will be noticed as they draw your attention inward and upward, he said. He also would opt for interesting wood types and patterns. “I like to take a cut of wood that looks like the inside of a tree, so you see the ring pattern on the stair riser edge,” he said.

Railings are another opportunity to vary a design. “We love to play with many different materials when designing our railings: wood, steel, horizontal, or vertical slats,” Jefferys says. “Cable railing and clear glass almost disappear to create a feeling of openness.”

Mary Maydan, principal and founder of Maydan Architects in Palo Alto, Calif., recently used metal screens with different designs as rails, and, in another project, thin strings of metal from floor to ceiling. She opts for metal rails on winding curved staircases, and metal as well as glass rails or stainless steel cables for straight staircases.

But Maydan always considers who is living in the home. “When our clients are families with young kids, we urge them to use continuous stairs and not ones where each tread is detached from the other, to play it safe,” she says. “The same considerations apply to the railing as well. When there are young kids in the house, we opt for cable railings over metal bars.”

MATERIALS MATTER

Varney consistently utilized marble

in his designs, for its crisp, clean lines. The traditional-yet-contemporary feel of marble was utilized in a staircase his firm worked on in the lobby of the famed Carlyle Hotel in New York City.

McNally prefers natural textures, “as we find it’s the No. 1 way to improve a sense of wellness and quality in the home,” and juxtaposes two or more materials. Jefferys loves a mixture of steel and wood to create contrast.

On an engineered side of things, O’Donnell suggests using plywood to soften a space and give it an architectural edge. “After all, there’s something inherently architect-friendly about ply; it’s a good, affordable way to help elevate a home’s aesthetic,” he says.

ARTFUL ACCENTS

Adding elements such as runners, lighting, or paint can enhance the decorative effect. Runners, especially, add warmth, texture, and comfort and are an easy way to change a look. “A runner gives you the chance to add a long ascending (and descending) strip of personality,” O’Donnell says. “Runners can add bright splashes of color, bold geometric patterns, organic swirls, block colors, stripes—you can have so much fun with them,” he says. And from a practical standpoint, they protect stair treads and hide unwanted signs of aging when updating an older home, Maydan says.

Lighting is another way to create artistry and highlight the design. “Linear LEDs provide so many new ways for dramatic lighting effects. In our recent projects, we’ve integrated strips of LED lights to the bottom of each tread. It creates a beautiful effect,” Maydan says.

Jefferys prefers to highlight minimal staircases with accent cove lighting “to create a general glow as if the staircase is levitating separately from the supporting wall.” She often adds a statement pendant light above the staircase to enhance the design and create a focal point. McNally, on the other hand, always aims to make the most of natural light. “A skylight at the top of a staircase will be the best option,” he says.

A painted staircase is an easy way to add punch. “You could paint spindles in a subtly graduating color from light to dark in an ombré effect,” O’Donnell says. A contrasting, colorful handrail set against a more simply painted staircase can also add a surprising element. ▣

Opposite page: A floating staircase from California-based Mary Maydan of Maydan Architects. This page: An artful staircase designed by Sam McNally, co-founder of London-based Echlin.