

A STEP UP CUSTOM STAIRCASES TAKE YOU TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Lake Norman Homefronts
By Sam Boykin
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Inside a 12,000-square-foot warehouse in Matthews, about a dozen workers combine their individual expertise and skills to create unique and functional works of art. Using white oak and poplar, as well as more exotic woods, including Brazilian cherry, walnut and maple, these craftsmen piece together specialized, handcrafted, custom staircases, many of which can be found in some of Lake Norman's most luxurious homes, including those of star athletes and NASCAR drivers.

Works of art

"Our stairs aren't mass-produced or generic," says Kevin Schoolcraft, president of Masterpiece Staircase & Millwork. "Our guys are artists and master craftsmen, and they take pride in their work."

Schoolcraft explains that the company is able to achieve such unique and prized staircases by combining traditional European craftsmanship with youthful artistic sensibilities. For example, Aaron

Hensley is one of several relatively young employees with an art school background. He graduated from UNC Charlotte in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in fine arts. With a passion for sculpture and graphic design, Hensley uses his fine arts knowledge to create intricate, detailed staircases, which he refers to as functional sculpture.

Hensley often works with experienced carpenters and woodworkers, including Steve Lukens, who has worked in the carpentry field for more than 25 years. Lukens was trained using a traditional European building system, which, unlike mass-produced stairs, employs a detailed style in which the different parts of the stairs are carefully and individually centered and aligned. Lukens explains that this creates even joints and intersections, resulting in stronger and more uniform staircases that won't squeak.

How it comes together

Schoolcraft says the company builds and installs about six staircases a week, close to half of which are circular. The process begins with the craftsmen envisioning how to create a functional work of art from drawings and blueprints. Once the plans are finalized, workers build the stringers (the vertical side of the stairs), and work their way up, installing the treads (the part you step on), risers (vertical face of the step), and baluster (vertical piece between handrail and stair tread) as they go. For a circular staircase, one of the most challenging tasks is creating the handrails, according to Hensley. Whatever wood is being used has to be cut into thin strips so that



they can bend around whatever radius the job calls for.

The crew can put together a standard straight staircase in a couple of days, but for a more detailed circular staircase, it can take two to three weeks. If the staircase is relatively small, the crew can assemble it at the shop and install it whole at the house. But for many jobs, the staircase must be shipped to the customer's house in several parts and then installed.

Schoolcraft says an average straight staircase takes a minimum of 500 board feet (a board foot is 12 inches long, 12 inches wide and 1 inch thick) just to make the treads and handrail. Depending on the style and pattern of the staircase, at least that much material is necessary complete the stringers and risers.

Schoolcraft says one of the hottest trends is the Tuscan-style staircase, which has intricately detailed and curved panels, handrails and posts. He says the Tuscan style can look similar to ironwork but is less expensive.

Costs start at about \$3,000 for a simple, straight staircase, and can go as high as \$30,000 for a circular staircase. He recently had a \$75,000 job in which the customer requested high-end custom ironwork that required special welds and fabrication.

Taking on the challenges

Another company that builds and installs high-end staircases in the Lake Norman area is Watson Stairs, which is based in Huntersville. Fred Watson started the company in 2000, and his five-man operation works in several upscale neighborhoods, including The Peninsula, The Point, The Farms and River Run. Watson says the company makes about three staircases a week, and stresses that all the stairs are hand-crafted by trained experts. Prices start at \$3,000 for a standard straight staircase and about \$7,000 for a curved staircase.

"The sky is really the limit on those (curved staircases)," Watson says. "It all depends on what kind of woods and patterns the customer wants."

Watson says that over the years one of the biggest trends he's noticed in high-end staircases is people's eagerness to use different types of wood.

"It used to be where just about everything was made of red oak," Watson says. "Now there's no standard wood for stairs. People order mahogany, maple and Brazilian cherry. It's usually whatever best matches the floor."

Because of his company's relatively small size, Watson says, he is able to tackle these unusual projects using a variety of exotic woods, whereas some of the bigger companies might not be willing to take them on. "I like competing with the bigger companies," he says. "We have our own little niche that we do real well."

