

Flight Of Fancy

Alliance of Craftsmen and Homeowner Turns Mere Set of Steps Into a Striking Staircase



Masterpiece Staircase built the double-spiral staircase for a home in Concord.

A staircase is often the showpiece of a home: its graceful calls and balusters inviting family and guests to ascend to unseen regions above.

At the same time, it's utilitarian, a transporter of human cargo over years, sometimes centuries. As such, it has to remain safe and sturdy, even though there may be nothing but air underneath.

Making sure all these bases are touched often requires many minds and hands, of homeowner, architect, builder and staircase builder. Kevin Schoolcraft, president of Masterpiece Staircase & Woodwork in Stallings, calls several recent staircases



Masterpiece Staircase's balustrades are hand-carved from white oak to provide a classic look.



This double-elliptical staircase traverses several floors.

Photo by Massimo Sestini

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completed by his company "collaborations." The homeowner came up with the idea, the architect sketched it, and Masterpiece then made detailed drawings and built the stair.

One, the master staircase in the home of Daniel and Leigh Levine, climbs three

stories and has an architectural look, a reserved and stately arrangement of rectangles. The boxy outlines of treads and risers and newel posts are softened by rounded, oversize balusters and railings that curve around corners. The visible underside of

each level of the multilevel stair is decorated with yet more rectangles.

Salvaged Wood Finds a New Home

Dan Levine explains the understated style.



Under construction
Staircase & Wood

Photo: © Getty Images

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"It's an English-mancor style home," he says. "My wife and I were thinking about building a house. We found a home up in New York that we liked very well. We used that home as a guide."

Levine is president of Levine Properties, which deals in commercial real estate, and he decided to act as his own builder. He hired Harry Schrader of Schrader Design Inc., in Charlotte as architect.

The Levines had seen a staircase in Chicago that they liked, and they could visualize it in the home they were planning. "A stair that had the large balustrades," Levine says.

"I had a picture. We modified it just slightly, and they (Masterpiece Staircase) copied it," he says.

"They hand-built it onsite," he says, after

they custom-turned the many balusters on a lathe. "It's certainly one of a kind," he says.

It's one of a kind in another way. The treads are heart pine from the old Brown Rogers Dixon loft building that stood at the corner of Seventh Street and College Street. When Levine tore down the building that had housed the appliance and hardware distributorship, "I salvaged all the beams and the subflooring," he says. "I ultimately took those beams and cut them up into wood floors."

He used the wood not only in his home's master staircase but in three other staircases — all built by Masterpiece — and in the home's flooring. In the master stair, not only the treads but the rails are antique heart pine, and the balusters and "stringer" or frame, are painted white.





A craftsman at work at Masterpiece Staircase & Woodwork.

Photo by Richard Nudell

"That's the first and last house I will be building," Levine says. Since he'd been putting up commercial buildings for years, he says, "I really thought ... 'How difficult could it be to build a little old house?' Let me tell you, I have a newfound respect for folks that build these kinds of custom homes."

In spite of the challenges, he says now, "My wife and I both are delighted with the end product." And the master stair, he says, "is spectacular."

Looking Back to Britain

A bit of British style turns up in the master stair of another new Charlotte home. Designer/builder Christopher Phelps wanted a spec home he built recently to have overtones of the British Arts & Crafts period. He's the principal in Origin Luxury Homes by Christopher Phelps and in the architectural firm of Christopher Phelps & Associates.

"We scoured books," looking for old European stairways, Masterpiece's Schoolcraft remembers. He has several artists on staff, and, "I sent 'em all home with a pad and paper" to come up with ideas.

"We wanted something that isn't just baluster work," Phelps says. He wanted carving. But, says Schoolcraft, "No one can afford to do that anymore."

Their answer, a series of carved panels, draws on both modern technology and old-fashioned hand craftsmanship. Phelps chose an oak leaf design, a common British Arts & Crafts detail, and Masterpiece used its new computerized router to cut multiple copies.

"If you look at some of the great English country homes, you'll see some carved panel work like it," Phelps says. Before it could craft the Phelps staircase, Masterpiece had to buy \$10,000 worth of software that enables it to make the oak-leaf copies in 3-D. Mark Druckenmiller, a Masterpiece woodworker for nine years, then finished the job, hand-carving the places the machine missed.

The staircase is made of quarter-sawn white oak, a staple of British Arts & Crafts homes. The home's three other staircases are British Arts & Crafts style, too. Phelps says, but in contrast to the more flamboyant main stair, "they're more simple,

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Photo by: Maximine Design

An open under stair with custom turned chrome finials, balusters and custom handrail.

almost Shaker-looking."

While clients focus on design, Masterpiece's concerns extend to performance over time. "We're probably the only company I know of that offers a lifetime guarantee," Schoolcraft says. "If the stairs squeak 20 years later, you call us, we fix it."

Instead of screwing newel posts to landings, Masterpiece notches them and wraps them around the outside of the landing, then bolts the two together. "It becomes a part of it," Schoolcraft says. "You can shake that all you want, and it's not going to loosen up."

Straight stairs are assembled onsite from components made in the shop. "So it will be an exact fit," he says.

Spiral stairs are assembled in the shop, around a set of precisely positioned poles.

Clients sometimes come by to "ooh" and "ahh" as their stairs take shape, says Schoolcraft. "They get so excited."

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