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How many versions of David Heide's clipped arch shape in the lighted newel post can you spot in this picture?

OPPOSITE, TOP: Details in a newel post will likely appear in other forms elsewhere in a well-designed house.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Treads oak and the balustrade maple, but aniline dyes create a consistent look in a stair designed by Jim Erler, and patterned after a Greene & Greene house.

# In the moment

BY MARY ELLEN POLSON

Building a new staircase? Keep it simpler than your first inclination.



CONVENTIONAL wisdom says that a staircase is cause for an architectural statement, especially if the house is new. While the sweep of highly ornamented stair may make a splash when you walk in the door, the positive impact won't last long if the level of detail in the stair outstrips the trim used elsewhere.

"Many people will make the staircase the big moment in the house," says Jim Erler, a designer in Smith Mountain Lake, Virginia. The problem comes in when "the rest of the house doesn't have another moment like that."

It's not about money, although a house with a consistent level in trim and decoration will reward you in terms of appraisal or resale value. It's about setting an overall standard of quality, he says. "You want to establish your base level, not your best level."

Think of a staircase as the connecting tissue between the different levels of the house, both physically and aesthetically. A good stair can and should embody aspects of other trim work, from decorative elements, to scale, and the look and finish of the wood. "That's something I learned





**LEFT:** The staircase in a recent California house interprets cloudlift patterns and hand joinery details famously seen in Greene & Greene's stair design for the Blacker House in Pasadena.

**RIGHT:** The crossbar motif in the newel posts in a new home in San Diego are repeated not only in the balustrade, but also in the windows and light fixtures.



from walking through the Gamble House," Erler says. "The consistency never lets down."

There is plenty of room for playfulness and variety—including in terms of wood selection. Like Charles and Henry Greene, Erler used several species for the trim throughout a recently completed house that pays homage to their designs. And like the Greene brothers, he used aniline dyes to pull everything together.

Decorative motifs should reappear in other places, even other forms. For instance, the distinctive clipped arch shape used in David Heide's staircase for a Minnesota home is most noticeable in the lighted newel posts. But the shape reappears in the glass panels in a built-in bookcase at the bottom of the stair, and as wood pilasters that divide stretches of wallpaper in the frieze-like spaces below the second-floor balustrade. (The shape is simply inverted.)

Similarly, the crossbar motif that appears in newel posts in a San Diego home reappears not just in oth-

er trim work, but also in the windows and even light fixtures. As much fun as all this sounds, resist the urge to go wild with repetition and variation. Even the Greene brothers used some

restraint. "If you look at their houses," Erler says, "you'll see that they use ornament very sparingly."

Perhaps that's why they are still examples of great design today. ■

## architects and designers

Some design resources to get you started on your stair quest. For a full listing, see "Sites and Services" at [designcentersourcebook.com](http://designcentersourcebook.com).

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