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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.

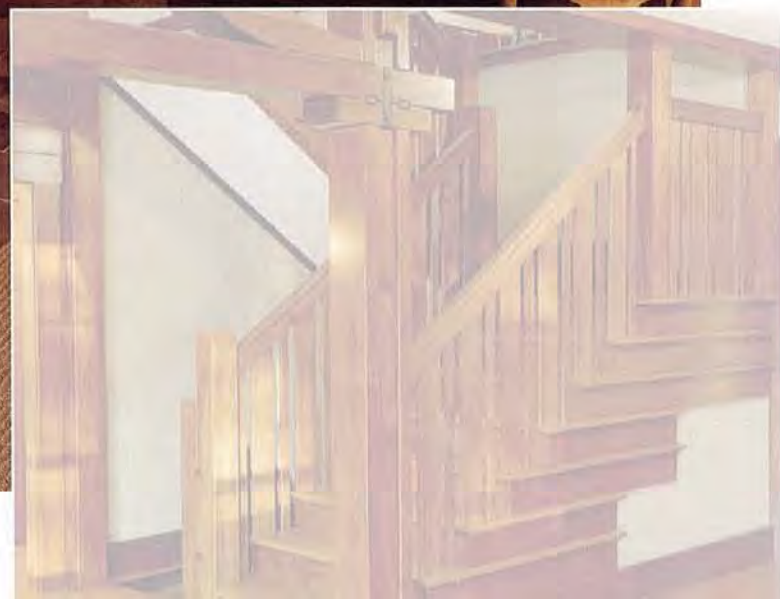


CONVENTIONAL wisdom says that a staircase is cause for an architectural statement, especially if the house is new. While the sweep of highly ornamented stair may make a splash when you walk in the door, the positive impact won't last long if the level of detail in the stair outstrips the trim used elsewhere.

"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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## Stair Components and Design

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#### COTTAGE CLASSIC

Beaded board as a high wainscot, bracketed shelves, and an oval mirror give an old cottage look to this bathroom. The vanity terminates on the right (not seen) in a tall matching cabinet that sits right on the stone countertop. The combination of closed storage and open shelves is practical and attractive.

#### CROWN POINT CABINETS

CLAREMONT, N.H.

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www.crownpoint.com • 2008 Shingle

Style Home, (P082114)



# the new bath

## UNIQUE, PERSONAL, CLASSIC

**W**E OFTEN SAY that renovating (or building) in period style is about being timeless rather than trendy. The house provides cues to what's appropriate—to what will still look right in three years, or fifty. Thus we narrow our possibilities from the start, saving us from considering every fad temporarily car-

rying the market. Right now, the irony (or benefit) is that the traditional look is what's in for kitchens and bathrooms. Unfitted cabinets, wood and stone and tile, beaded board, porcelain sinks, Arts and Crafts and Neoclassical lines are very much in evidence, recalling the homes of the early 20th century.



#### BELLE EPOQUE ▲

Classic materials with longevity, including the hex-tile floor and subway-tile wainscot, mark this bathroom in an addition to a classical Foursquare house. The look is early 1920s, but befits any fine home ca. 1890s through about 1930.

**DAVID HEIDE DESIGN STUDIO, MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.:**  
(612) 337-5060, dhdstudio.com • 1904 American Foursquare house

#### COLONIAL REVIVAL ►

This spacious new bathroom was designed in what was formerly garage storage space. Featuring a soaking tub, pedestal sink, and private toilet area, the bath is attached to the family room in this house. Glass block replacing a former garage window admits light while providing privacy and disguising the under-deck view of the back yard. Interior design by Margo Searson.

**MATHEWS ARCHITECTURE, ASHEVILLE, N.C.:**  
mathewsarchitecture.com • 1986 Georgian Revival house

- A vessel sink in a high-traffic bathroom. Deep bowls are hard to clean, and shallow ones create a lot of splash-over. Forget a glass sink unless you have a house staff.
- Wood countertops. Well-caulked and sealed teak or mahogany looks rich and historical. Do consider, though, that wood counters require periodical refinishing.
- Colored fixtures. If you're doing a historical jewel box—

**White tile** (or a white-painted wainscot) is a classic treatment that works in almost any house. Simple, timeless, and clean, the look may be high-style urban, with built-ins and marble, or country cottage, with beadboard and roller shades.



the ultimate Fifties-style bath, or a Streamlined one—flamingo, turquoise, or gloss-black toilets and sinks are part of the package. In general, though, white and ivory fixtures are historical and easy to live with.

- Thinking upgrades are “must have.” Double vanities/two sinks means more plumbing expense, less counter space, and twice the cleaning time—worth it only when two people must use the same bathroom at the same time. Your designer insists on a whirlpool tub and steam shower? How much will you really use these things? Many remod-



#### ▼ TILE & STONE

In this new lake house in northern Minnesota, bathrooms are not large but offer the beautiful materials and design motifs of the rest of the house. A custom tile treatment frames the mirror in this small guest bathroom; note the pebbles-in-concrete floor. The house is a handsome example of the revival of Arts and Crafts.

**DAVID HEIDE DESIGN STUDIO, MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.:**  
(612) 337-5060, dhdstudio.com • new construction



#### ▲ ARTFUL RE-USE ▲

The owner amassed a startling collection of Grueby tiles and used them throughout his conversion of a late-18th-century gristmill, including the bathroom floor and as a wainscot cap. The stained-glass scenic window is also of the Arts and Crafts era. Salvaged period lighting highlights every room.

**DESIGN BY OWNER** • 1792 gristmill conversion, Buckingham, Penn.

elers report that extra storage would have been a better use of the space and budget.

If our editorial scouts are any indication, the biggest trend is . . . well, not following trends. For a while we saw mostly white-wainscot cottage baths. Then the brown wood-and-amber color A&C revival bath was popular. Recently, however, each bathroom is unique. Deco and mid-century bath styles are coming back. Classics endure, but even these are being personalized with artfully chosen elements. • —PATRICIA POORE