

# Building Scene

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING

Marilyn Fitchett editor/591-2300



★ 1H

Thursday, October 25, 1990 O&E



A floating, curved stairway is not only functional but distinctive. It was designed by the Farmington Hills architectural firm Erdstein, Bryce and Pallazola. Be-

low, an open staircase placed in the middle of a room adds openness. It was designed by Janet Compo of James D. Compo Inc. in Farmington Hills.

Photos by JIM JAGDFELD/staff photographer

## Stare-case

More than just functional, stairways act as focal points

By Gerald Frawley  
staff writer

Few architectural elements offer as much of a chance for drama as the staircase.

Staircases don't just give access to upper or lower floors; they rise, they curve, they roll, they ascend.

And it beats climbing a rope.

Janet Compo, a designer and builder with the Farmington Hills-based James D. Compo Inc., said stairways can be focal points as well as functional.

For example, in the Parkview model home designed by Compo at the Builders Association of Southeast Michigan Homearama in Brighton, the stairway ascends from the entryway in a gentle curve before straightening out and rising to the upper floor. Open on both sides, the stairway looks over the foyer, dining and great rooms.

"We wanted to have it as a focal point where you walk in the door and it presents itself," she said.

Architect Robert Bryce, president of Erdstein, Bryce and Pallazola in Farmington Hills, said since staircases are almost exclusively placed near a home's entrance, they generally need dressing up.

"It's almost a given that a stairway will be introduced into the foyer — it's the most practical place to put it. So since it's practical, why not make it beautiful."

ERDSTEIN, BRYCE and Pallazola designed the staircase in the Dynasty home built by Koch Development of Troy.

"We try to make staircases both a focal point and a work of art," he said.

But not every staircase is a work of art, he said. What separates an average staircase from an outstanding one are its characteristics.

Placement of the stairway — whether it's in the middle of an open space, situated in a corner or enclosed along a wall — has a drastic impact on a staircase's influence on a home, he said.

How the stairway is built also changes a staircase's impact.

An open stairway is more dramatic, an enclosed stairway is less so, and a stairway along a wall is more functional than dramatic. "If we float the stairway, we can see through it — the visual line beyond the stairway frames it — and it gives a sense of openness."

A closed stairway or a stairway with a supporting wall depends less on its surroundings and more on the stairway itself for its appeal, he said. A truly impressive stairway becomes part of its surrounding and has intrinsic appeal, he added.

The stairway's shape, from a simple straight row of steps to a gentle curve, also affects a staircase's impact on a home.

"A curved stairway is much more sensual than a straight one. A straight staircase is more utilitarian," he said.

A SPIRAL, U-shaped or L-shaped staircase, offers a different appeal. A U-shaped and L-shaped staircase offers a landing or rest area halfway up; a spiral staircase usually gives a home a contemporary feel. "But spiral staircases are usually not the primary stairway — we try to use them only as a

*'It's almost a given that a stairway will be introduced into the foyer — it's the most practical place to put it. So since it's practical, why not make it beautiful.'*

— Robert Bryce, architect

last possible solution because they're uncomfortable and more difficult."

Finally, a stairway's intrinsic appeal comes from the material it's made of, the craftsmanship of the work and even its shape.

For a wood staircase, the appeal often comes from the wood. Oaks, cherry and maple woods, for example, all have different attributes that change the appearance of a stairway, he said.

Metal staircases give a more contemporary feel, and for a truly contemporary feel, glass panels or tubes and special lighting can be added, Bryce said.

"Contemporary is sleek, crisp, clean and uncluttered — what says that more than glass?"

The intricacies of the pieces — the newels, balustrades, spindles and footings and rails — also make a big difference in a stairway's appeal, Bryce said. "In the better staircase, pieces are custom milled so that the spindles and railings are unique."

Compo said even in lower end homes the staircase has taken on an increased importance — even if the stairway is against the wall and out of the way. "In most cases people want their stairways to look good no matter where they are."

"What's important is the stairway should be designed to fit the home," Compo said.

ANOTHER CHARACTERISTIC that's largely forgotten when designing a stair, Compo said, is safety. "Let's face it, you spend a lot of time going up and down a stairway," she said.

"In the more expensive homes, people are putting emphasis on looks; in the less expensive homes, the staircases have to look nice, but the greater emphasis is on safety," she said.

Which is not to say that more expensive staircases are unsafe — all should be equally safe — just that the predominant factor is safety, she said.

It almost goes without saying that a stairway must be secure so it doesn't rock or sway, she said, and each type of stairway poses different problems.

Floating stairways, naturally, are going to require a different type of engineering than a straight staircase built into a wall, she said.

But as important as the engineering is, Compo said, the way the stairs climb may be just as important. "It must be a comfortable rise and tread."

"Older stairways were almost always too steep," she said, adding stairways should have a suggested riser of eight inches and a minimum tread of nine inches.

A staircase's width should be no less than three feet, she added. "Anything less can be a tripper."

A staircase can add significantly to the price of a home, Compo continued. "It's not uncommon for someone to spend \$3,000 to \$5,000 more for a nicer stairway — really nice ones can cost an additional \$5,000 to \$10,000."

