

# with stairs

Splendid or simple, this most basic of features can do a lot to enhance a home.

By STEPHANIE BOUCHARD  
News Assistant

**S**alt and pepper strands escape Robert Cariddi's loosely pony-tailed hair in corkscrews. As he excitedly gestures with his hands, his eyeglasses suddenly fly from his fingers, dropping 10 feet to the wooden floor below. Cariddi pauses in his enthusiastic description to declare, "I just dropped my glasses," before talking on as if dropping his glasses from the third floor of his Buxton home were nothing new. What could be so consuming that a person would override the basic instinct to retrieve a fallen pair of glasses? A staircase. A flying spiral staircase. A staircase is the most standard and practical of home features. In Cariddi's home, it is also a work of art. This tight coil of plaster, Honduras mahogany and bird's-eye birch seems magically suspended between the floor and ceiling of the third floor of Cariddi's home.

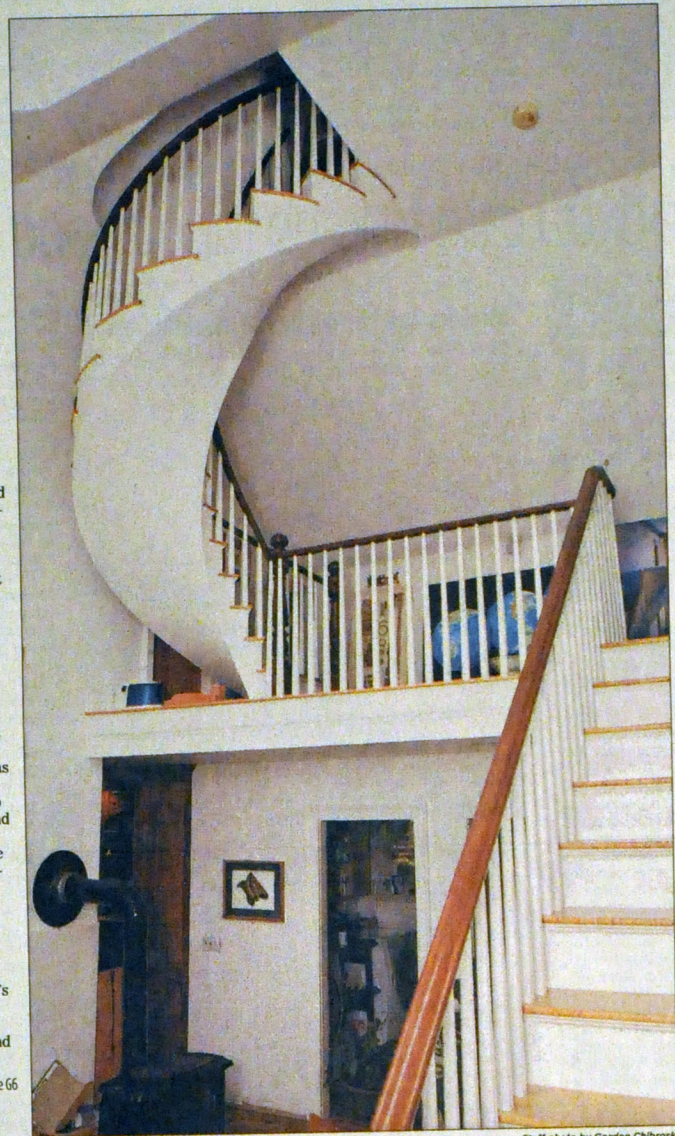
Hand-carved newel posts of Honduras mahogany anchor the span of stairs to the third floor. The stairs sweep up into the air space between the third floor and the roof. The head of the stairs is secreted in a pond-shaped alcove in the ceiling where this lyrical but solid staircase is bolted to the walls. Above the head of the staircase is a hatch in the ceiling that leads to an observatory on the roof.

Cariddi, a master carpenter, spent four months creating his 14-foot flying spiral staircase. "The whole thing that's beautiful about it is that it defies gravity," he says.

A flying staircase, a feat of design and engineering genius in which the stair-

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# FLAIR



Staff photo by Gordon Chibroski

Bob Cariddi built a flying spiral staircase in his Buxton home.



Staff photo by Gordon Chibroski

The massive three-story octagonal staircase in the Maine State Building in Poland Spring is striking in its beauty.

## TYPES OF STAIRCASES

THERE ARE MANY types of staircases with many kinds of variations. Here are some basic types.

- Straight stairs: The name pretty much says it all. These staircases run in a straight line with no turns.
- L stairs: Shaped in the form of an L, these staircases have a landing with a 90-degree turn somewhere along the flight.
- Double L stairs: A double L staircase actually looks more like a Z. It has two landings with 90-degree turns.
- U stairs: Two flights that are parallel to each other with a landing of varying widths between the flights.
- Winder stairs: Similar to L stairs except the landing is replaced with winder steps.

(Winder steps are pie-shaped; one end of the step is narrower than the other.)

- Spiral stairs: Spirals often have a central post. Some spirals, such as a double helix, do not.
- Flying: A flying staircase is a feat of engineering and design genius. It can take spiral or straight forms, but what makes a flying staircase remarkable is that it appears to be unsupported.

## RESOURCES

- "BASIC STAIRBUILDING," by Scott Schuttner, Taunton Press.
- "STAIRCASES," by Haik Falkenberg, Teneues.
- "STAIRCASES," by Eva Jiricna, Watson-Guptill.
- "CONTEMPORARY STAIRCASES," by Catharine Slessor, Mitchell Beazley.

# STAIRCASE

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case is not supported along its span, is one of the most dramatic examples of the staircase as art. (You can see flying staircases in Victoria Mansion and the McLellan-Sweet House in Portland. Cariddi did conservation work on both of those staircases.)

As a standard feature in nearly all buildings – even if just a bare-bones flight into the basement – staircases have the magical ability of being useable art.

A staircase transforms a space, says Cariddi. For instance, it can add visual height to a room that would otherwise seem cramped.

"If you make each of the elements (in a staircase) beautiful," says Cariddi, "it can't help but make the whole (staircase) beautiful."

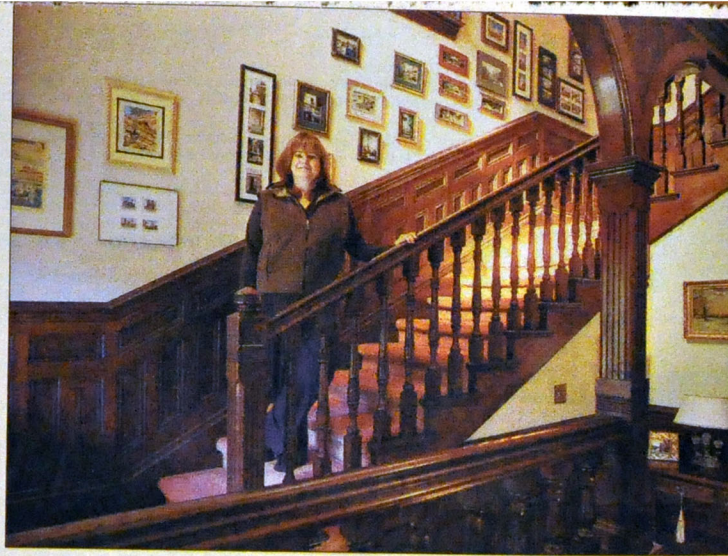
A staircase moves you up and down, allowing you access to various floors, but it also adds to the home's flavor. A stand-out staircase will bring you pleasure and add value and is a great selling point.

When Diane Morabito was considering buying her Victorian house in Gardiner, the home's formal staircase and foyer played a big role in her decision to buy it. "The foyer attracted me," she says, "(its) woodwork and the fact that it's in original condition."

Built in 1893 for H.W. Jewett, the owner of the largest lumber mill in Gardiner, the home's formal staircase was created to befit a prominent family in town. The beauty of the staircase is known around town and that says something, says Morabito. People who have never seen the staircase know about it.

The staircase has two 90-degree turns, making it a double L-style staircase. Framed with ribbed woodwork and ornamented with carved rosettes and picture-frame moulding on the wainscoting, this formal staircase is an elaborate wooden structure that would have been used by the family on a daily basis and for entertaining. Natural light from two large stained glass windows adds a golden glow in the morning.

Morabito, who bought the 4,000-square-foot home in 1993, finds the formal front staircase great for parties and a terrific



Staff Photo by John Ewing

Diane Morabito stands on the ornate staircase of her Victorian-era home in Gardiner.

spot for photographs. Her oldest daughter and son both had their prom photos taken on it and former owners lined up a wedding party for photographs.

During the Christmas season, Morabito is able to put a 20-foot tree in the corner formed by the straight run of stairs meeting the second landing making its 90-degree turn.

As lovely as the formal staircase is, Morabito says she often finds herself using the servants' staircase off the kitchen in the back of the house.

When she was looking at the house, her real estate agent told her the owner of the house used the servants' staircase more than the formal staircase. "I had told my real estate agent, 'When I move in, I'll always use the front stairs.' But now that I'm here, I use the front about two-thirds of the time."

It's more convenient to get to the upper floors of the house from the kitchen than to go to the front of the house to use the formal staircase. A simple staircase with a plain wood rail attached to a wall, the servants' staircase led to the servants' quarters on the second floor. It is flanked left and right by the walls of the house and has one

90-degree turn at the top of the staircase, making it L-styled. A single window at the landing lets in natural light.

Simple staircases have a beauty all of their own, and they are often easy enough to spruce up if you're so inclined.

"A lot of times," says Cariddi, "people have nice, old staircases but everything's loose." Hiring a carpenter to tighten things up will not only tune up the structure of the staircase, but will also improve how it looks.

Cariddi says that one of the simplest and least expensive things to do to spruce up a staircase is to repaint or refinish it, especially the treads, which get a lot of wear.

For a really different look, replace the balustrade, which consists of the railing and balusters. The project will cost between \$2,000 and \$3,000, says Cariddi, and the cost rises depending on how detailed or elaborate the work is, especially if hand-carving is involved.

Love the look of circular staircases? Straight staircases can be replaced with circular ones, but it costs quite a bit and eats up a lot of floor space. Think, instead, of replacing the starting steps on your straight staircase with longer steps to add flare to the staircase. This will be cheaper and won't take up as much space.

Also consider replacing a straight staircase with a spiral staircase, which provides curves but doesn't take up as much space as a circular staircase. Many spiral staircase kits are available for reasonable prices, in addition to custom-made spirals.

When making staircase changes or adding staircases, check the town's building codes. Maine doesn't have the same building codes statewide, so what is OK in one town may not be in another.

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## MAINE STATE BUILDING STAIRCASE

BEAUTIFUL STAIRCASES are not just for private homes. The Maine State Building, constructed to represent the state of Maine at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, has a staircase fitting a three-floor octagonal space.

BEGINNING NEARLY 40 feet beneath a frosted glass mosaic ceiling, the quarter-sawn oak staircase glows in the sunlight pouring through the windows. Following the octagonal shape of the building, the staircase and the front entry hall form a U. The stairs run up the left and right sides of the entry hall, make 90-degree turns, then meet on a landing between the first and second floors, continuing to the second floor as one center flight.

THE STAIRCASE is accented with long columns, wainscoting and turned balusters interspersed with corkscrew balusters.

THE MAINE STATE Building's components were built in Maine, shipped to Chicago and assembled there. When the exposition closed, the Ricker family, who had been selling their Poland Spring water at the exposition, purchased the building,



Staff photo by Gordon Chibroski

Gorgeous wood greets those looking down a side of the Maine State Building's staircase.

had it disassembled, and shipped it to Poland Spring, where it was re-assembled and used as a library and art gallery. Today, this structure is one of the only buildings surviving from the exposition. It is open to the public for a small fee from May to October. Go to [www.polandspringps.org](http://www.polandspringps.org).

## MORE YOU CAN SEE

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED in seeing some fabulous staircases, check out the following places open to the public.

**MCLLELLAN-SWEAT HOUSE:** Part of the Portland Museum of Art at 7 Congress Square in Portland. Built in 1801, the McLellan-Sweet House has

a flying staircase. The house is open during regular museum hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday and Saturday and Sunday and 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday. Call 775-6148 or go to [www.portlandmuseum.org](http://www.portlandmuseum.org) for more information. Admission to the house is included in museum admission. Museum admission is \$8, \$6 for seniors and students with identification, \$2 for ages 6 to 17, free for children under age 6. Admission is free for all on Fridays after 5 p.m.

**VICTORIA MANSION:** 109 Danforth St. in Portland. Built between 1858-60, Victoria Mansion has a flying staircase. The house is open May through October, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday. The house is also open for the Christmas season. Call 772-4841 or go to [www.victoriamansion.org](http://www.victoriamansion.org). Admission is \$10, \$9 for adults ages 62 and older, \$3 for students ages 6 to 17, free for children under age 6. Christmas season admission differs from regular season admission.

**TATE HOUSE:** 1270 Westbrook St. in Portland. Built in 1755, the Tate House has a tight staircase with

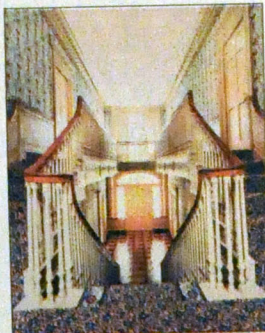


Photo courtesy of www.meyersphoto.com

The flying staircase in the McLellan-Sweet House is an engineering and design marvel.

three turns that wrap around the chimney. The house is open through October from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday. Special house tours are offered during the Christmas season. Call 774-6177 or go to [www.tatehouse.org](http://www.tatehouse.org). Admission is \$7, \$5 for adults ages 65 and older, \$2 for children under age 12, free for children under age 6.

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