

STAIRWAYS TO HEAVEN

With architects increasingly putting our steps in their sights, the only way is up. And down, says *Hugh Graham*

If you thought a staircase was simply designed to transport you from A to B, you are sadly mistaken. In smart houses up and down the land, a statement staircase is the latest must-have, especially one that doubles as a work of art: some of the extraordinary structures could be mistaken for sculptures by Turner-prize hopefuls. And not just in mega-mansions – even owners of humble terraced houses now know their helical from their spiral and their curved from their cantilevered.

In the 20th century, grand staircases captured the public imagination when Scarlett O'Hara swept down one at Tara in *Gone with the Wind*, but in Britain the bluebloods were descending grandly long before, everywhere from Buckingham Palace to Chatsworth House; and the Romans in their palazzos knew how to make an entrance centuries before that.

Staircases were overlooked for a while, it seems, but they're in vogue again, for several reasons: advances in engineering and technology, which have made outlandish shapes easier and less pricy to make; the return of British craftsmanship; and the rise and rise of the super-rich over the past decade – what do you commission once you have the second kitchen, the iceberg basement and the waterfall chandelier? Instagram culture is fuelling one-upmanship in design, and those new-found methods mean staircases can also be used to inject light into dark British homes.

Clients who don't go for a jaw-dropping sculpture often opt for an optical illusion (glass treads and balustrades, cantilevered steps). Open treads let in the light and create a sense of space. But it's not just about the visuals: canny designers are crafting staircases that incorporate storage. And consider comfort: leave space for deep treads, so you're not walking on your tiptoes, and a low rise, so you can float up the stairs, says the designer Richard McLane, whose firm, Bisca, has expanded rapidly in the past three years.

Here are 10 ideas to take you up and down in style.

WILL SCOTT; KEITH COLLIE; IOANA MARINESCU; ADAM BROWN; CHRIS SNOOK; JACK HOBHOUSE; PAULA BEETLESTONE; TIM CROCKER; MARTIN GARDNER; SIMON KENNEDY



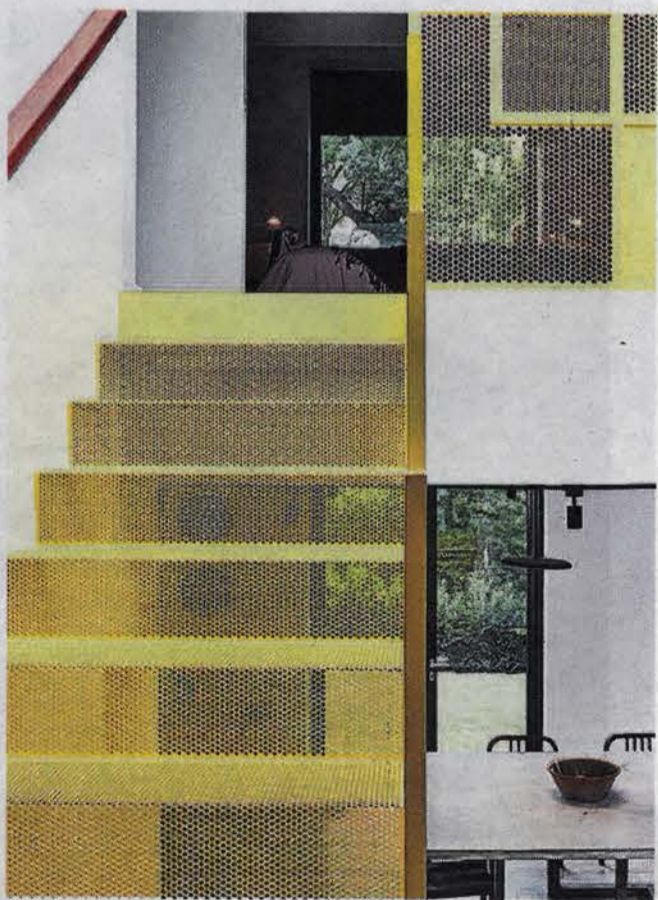
AHEAD OF THE CURVE

Helical staircases are the stair du jour in modern houses. But don't call them spiral staircases – those are supported by a central column. Helicals can support themselves and, thanks to advances in technology, are ever more flamboyant. This swirly spectacle belies its location in the front hall of a neo-Georgian house in Highgate, north London. It reflects the owners' mixed tastes: the husband wanted grandeur, the wife a gallery feel. "It allows for the person entering to feel awe and for the homeowner to make a movie-star entrance," says the architect, Catherine Finkernagel. She hired Littlehampton Welding, a firm that has worked for Thomas Heatherwick and Anish Kapoor: "It looks as if a ribbon was dropped down from the glass roof." finkernagelross.com



HOT STEPPER

This must be a design first: a staircase-cum-fireplace. Part of a barn conversion near Folkestone, Kent, it's in the second home of a tech entrepreneur. Although it looks rustic, it's brand-new, made from blackened steel, oak treads, a rubber handrail and handmade bricks. "We wanted it to look like part of the original barn," says the architect, Sophie Goldhill. The ceiling joists fan out in a circular pattern, echoing the staircase; at night, twinkly lights emit a halo. Never has a staircase looked so cosy. liddicoatgoldhill.com



ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

Yellow kitchens are a thing, and this modern house in Muswell Hill, north London, may well bring yellow stairs into vogue. The clients wanted a staircase that would let them see through to the back garden, so the architect, Andrew Mulroy, suggested mesh steel. When they said they wanted a colour, he mused in passing that yellow contrasted with the zinc black exterior. The next thing he knew, they'd painted it. "It's Marmite, but I'd have it in my house. In an era of austerity, people are trying to add joy." mulroyarchitects.com

TIMES DIGITAL

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STEEP IMPACT

"Stairs hiding storage" was the concept for these blocky steps. In the end, the client didn't want any handles to show, so now this is purely a route to the study above a bedroom in Hackney, east London. Space is tight, and the clients didn't want a ladder, so the architects, Binom, opted for "alternating tread stairs". These can be built at a steep angle, but let you descend facing forward. The pearwood veneer blends with the wall panels. For safety, there's a slim white handrail and a rope barrier. binom.co.uk



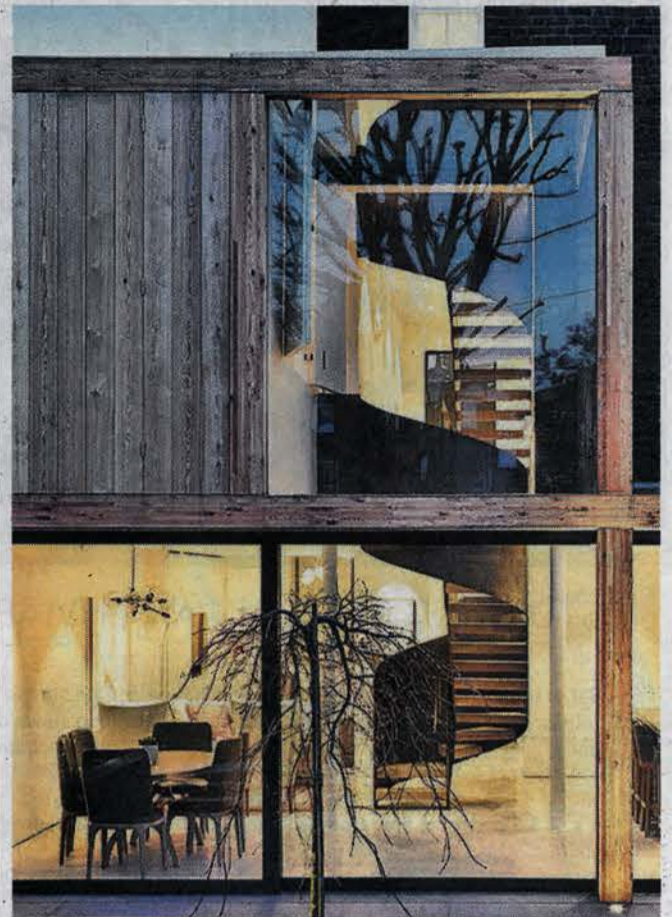
CIRCULAR THINKING

A piece of sculpture worthy of an Escher print, this helical staircase is also a marvel of carpentry, made possible by the imagination of the architect Hassan Nourbakhsh, the skills of Blue Engineering and the miracle of a CNC machine. It was commissioned by Janey de Nordwall when she was converting her flat in Bethnal Green, east London, into a two-storey maisonette. "I'm honoured to have it in my flat," she says. "Hassan told me, 'You will prefer to look at the stairs over watching the telly.' It's an installation." It's not as treacherous as it appears: "I glide up and down. It's a comfortable ride." borheh.com; blueengineering.co.uk



LIGHTNESS OF BEING

Part of a barn conversion in Hampshire, this staircase makes a quiet statement: it's not shaped like a helter-skelter or designed to seem like an art installation, it's just classy and elegant. Traditionalists will appreciate the hint of "Southern belle" sweep, but the sculptural twist in the newel post adds a touch of the avant-garde. "It's something to make you smile," says its designer, Richard McLane. The owners asked for a light aesthetic. The result was a floating stair in bleached ash, with slender steel balusters that taper as they rise, adding to the ethereal feel. And the deep first step "leads you into the staircase, it invites you in". bisca.co.uk



WINDING ITS WAY

Most clients who commission a staircase are after the wow factor, according to the architect Ben Cousins, who has certainly achieved it with this steel helical creation in a townhouse in De Beauvoir Town, east London. Soaring from the lower ground floor up to the first, it is the centrepiece of a double-height rear extension for a client who works in the art world and wanted a gallery feel. The dark steel has a tactile, leather-like finish, which was achieved by applying black wax and oil. cousinsandcousins.com



LET THERE BE LIGHT

This slatted timber staircase is a clever way of bringing light into the hallway of a four-storey terrace in east London. A roof light at the top of the stairwell helps; structural glazing on the ground floor lets light into the basement flat. "It looks wobbly, but it's extremely stable," says the architect, Taro Tsuruta. "I used cut-faced plywood, which is more robust than regular plywood." That said, Tsuruta admits that his client won't wear high heels on it — a small price to pay for beauty. tsurutaarchitects.com



GRAND ILLUSION

People are mesmerised by stairs made of cantilevered glass. "They don't quite believe it," says Andy Ramus, the architect of this £25,000 stair in Winchester. "When it was done, not a single builder would walk on it. They were afraid it would break." But the treads are triple laminate, 34mm deep: if you dropped a brick on one, the bottom layers would hold you up. Glass stairs are good in small, dark spaces, as they let in light, but the balustrades are not great for families. "You'd constantly be wiping off jam." ardesignstudio.co.uk



IF THE SHOE FITS

What to do with the cupboard under the stairs is a perennial problem, as is where to hide shoes in the hall. The architect Patrick Lewis has solved both issues in this north London home: drawers under the stairs double as a perch where the children can put on their shoes. The form is as striking as the function: is brown and white the new black and white? "It's a contemporary, highly engineered staircase," Lewis says, "but made of traditional English oak. It's lightweight, but grounded." patricklewisarchitects.com

