

# Fitting a Staircase

by Jamie Fisher

Nothing drives the organization of a house as much as the location and configuration of its stair. Particularly in a small house, the design and placement of the stair is probably the single most important factor in determining how workable a floor plan you end up with.

## Juggling Possibilities

I recently faced this fact when a potential buyer of a tiny post-war ranch asked me for advice on adding a second story for a bedroom suite. Where, he asked, should the stair go?

He was thinking of putting the stair in a small addition that would project into the back yard (see Figure 1), since a stair there wouldn't take up any space in the 750-square-foot house. Unfortunately, such a stair would be expensive to build, requiring a new foundation, floor, exte-

rior wall, and roof. And it would integrate poorly with the layout on either floor. For instance, moving between the living room and the upstairs master bedroom would require walking through the kitchen to the far corner of the house.

On the second floor, the stair and related circulation would eat up large portions of the prime southern exposure, and I had no idea how to tie the mass of the new stair wing into a convincing roofscape. Then there was the fact that a stair just plain wouldn't fit there: A stair-plus-hallway requires 6 foot 4 inches clear, and we were almost a foot short.

## Trading a Room for Space

So what would work better? My first idea was to carve a switchback stair out

of the living room and the larger of the two downstairs bedrooms. Because this plan would work off the existing circulation spine connecting the front door and the kitchen/back door, it would be convenient to every room and would deposit you into the middle of the house upon arrival at either floor.

I also liked the way this stair faced the center of the house rather than the front door. It would make a nice fixture alongside the living room, perhaps with a stained hardwood open rail; the space under the landing could hold the inevitable television. And a switchback stair is elegant; the landing affords not only a chance to rest, but a nice place to put a window to flood both stair and living room with light.

Unfortunately, a switchback stair takes up 15 more square feet than a

## Rejected Stair Plans



**Figure 1.** In making this one-story house a two-story, the author and his client explored three stairway locations. The first (left), a stair in an addition off the back, was rejected because it created bad traffic patterns and unnecessary expense. The second (right), the author's favorite, was a switchback stair installed in the living room — a more elegant stair, but rejected by the buyer because he wanted a larger living room.

straight run, and the owner was understandably reluctant to give up that kind of space from the living room.

Thus, the final scheme (Figure 2): It

converts the smaller of the two first-floor bedrooms to a den/home office and takes space from it for a simple, straight-run stair. The existing door to

this room is sealed up, replaced by new access (without a door) from the living room across the foot of the stair. The stair is open to both sides, which makes both the den and the living room seem more spacious. And while the stair lands just next to the front door, it doesn't crowd the entry by flowing right into it.

These deliberations show just how big a decision locating a stair is, particularly in a small house. As with many design decisions, there was no single right answer here. While the living room location would have produced a nicer stair and a more natural circulation pattern, it would also have seriously downsized the room — a deficiency that led the buyer to favor the other scheme. He probably made the right decision (isn't the client always right?), for he gave up less of his existing house to achieve his expansion goals.



**Jamie Fisher** is an architect in Seattle, Wash.

## The Final Plan



**Figure 2.** The accepted strategy was to put a straight stair in the front bedroom — a solution that made the room a den, but still created good traffic patterns and left the living room relatively large.