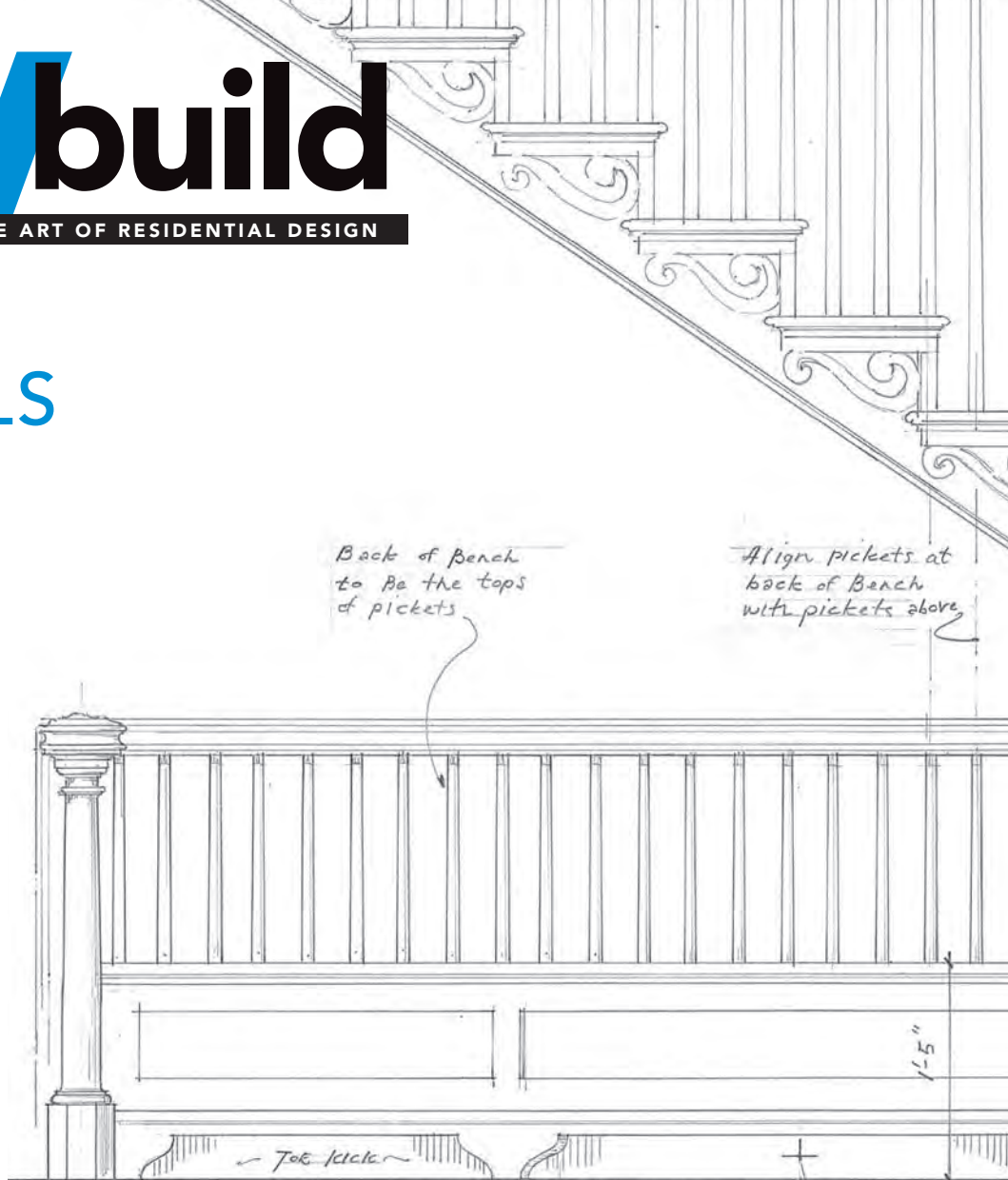


## STAIR NEWELS

BY MARIANNE CUSATO



Stair newels are both a practical requirement to stabilize a railing as well as an opportunity to add a design element to your home. While historic styles dictate strict details, in today's homes—even those based on traditional precedent—we have a wide range of design leverage to personalize and even modernize details like a newel post. Though stair-part manufacturers offer a range of well-designed stock newel options, consider designing and building custom newels if budgets allow. This way, you can go beyond the basics and create a theme and hierarchy with variations on the newels used throughout your house. Here are a few variables to consider when designing or selecting your stair newels.

Marianne Cusato is the author of *Get Your House Right: Architectural Elements to Use and Avoid*. Drawings by the author.

### NEWEL BASICS

#### Supporting or Terminating

A newel may support the handrail, sometimes with balusters wrapping the post (typically in a colonial or more-formal classical design). In other cases, especially on secondary stairs, the railing will terminate into a block at the top of the newel. Terminating newels are common when the railing is built from stock components. When designing or purchasing a terminating newel, it's nice to ease the end of the railing into the newel so it meets perpendicular to the newel, rather than at the angle of the stairs. This allows the terminating block to be slightly smaller, which makes the newel feel less top heavy.

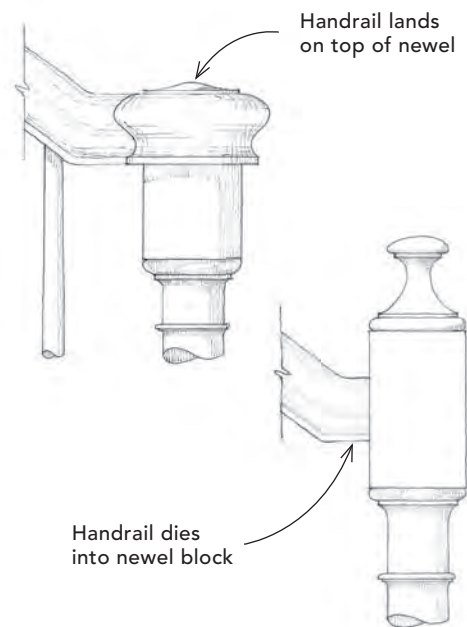
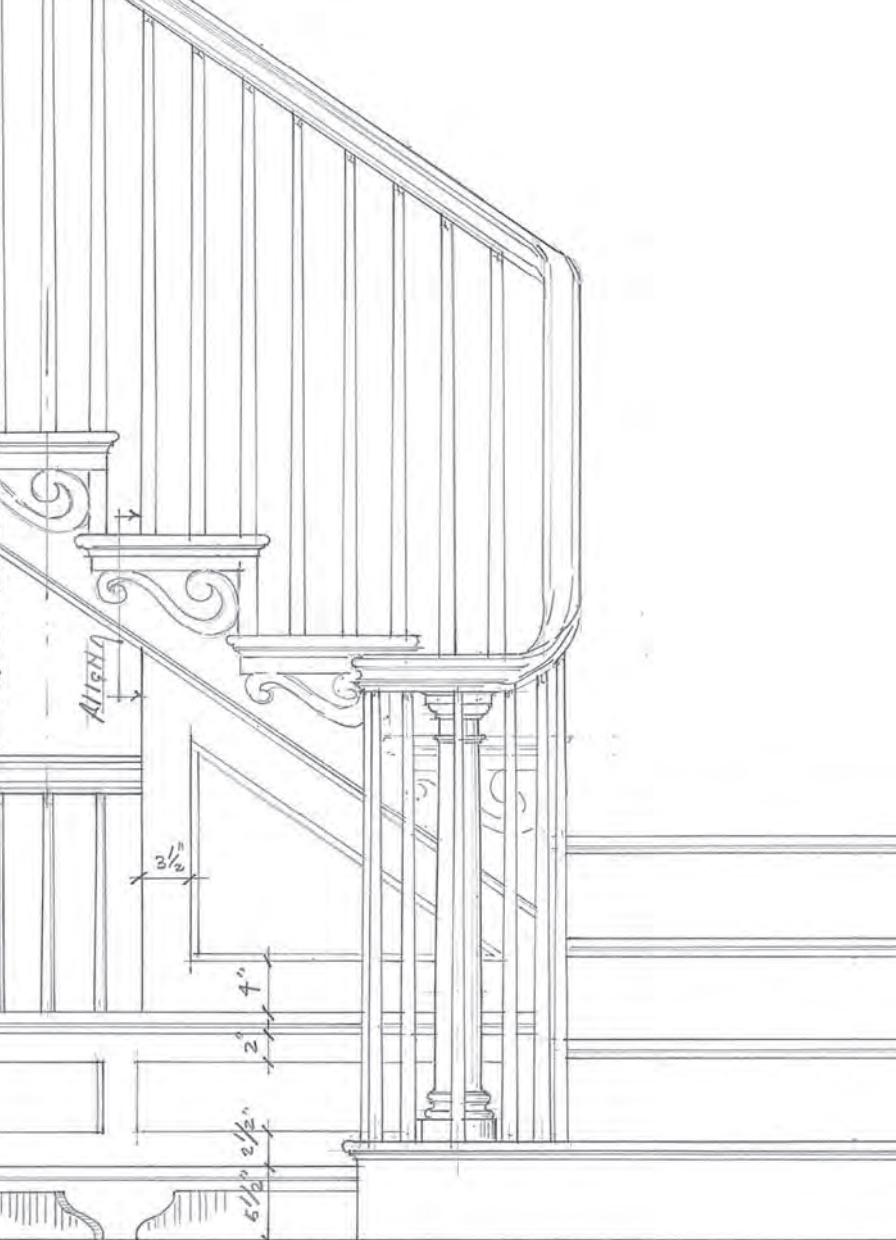


Photo: courtesy of the author



## CREATE A HIERARCHY

The design featured here illustrates the hierarchy between the newel at the foot of a main stair on the first floor of the house and a newel within the same run that leads to the basement. The two newels are designed to be variations on a theme. The main newel is a full Doric column with an attic base (three primary parts separated with fillets). This newel sits on the first tread of the stair and supports the railing. The secondary newel is also a Doric column that supports the railing, but it is more subtle, with a simplified base—a single torus (a convex, round shape) sitting on a hexagonal plinth. The height of the plinth aligns with the top of the first riser, at the cove molding. Since it is at the head of the basement stair, this newel is not wrapped with balusters. In this design, the newels are tied together by a bench, which incorporates the stair balusters as the back of the bench. As you design your own custom newels, ask yourself the following questions:

- How am I creating a hierarchy that differentiates the newels within a stair run and also throughout the house?
- How am I unifying the designs of the newels, so even within the hierarchy, they work as part of a single composition?

## The volute

The curve of a railing around a newel is based on the geometric form of a volute. The radius of the circle is reduced along a central square, which creates a smooth transition as the curve of the railing tightens.

## Box or Turned

Most newels are either box or turned. A turned newel is a single member with a profile cut on a lathe, often from 4x stock. A box newel may be a simple square post, perhaps with the corners eased, as shown here, or built up with recessed panels and moldings. For turned newels, look for a beginning, middle, and end with clearly defined molding profiles, rather than curved profiles that bleed into each other or a base that overpowers the rest of the newel. When purchasing stock box newels, less is often more. Take care to avoid box newels with heavy top moldings, as these have a tendency to look like exterior posts.

