

MULTI-PURPOSE DESIGN

Beyond the basics, don't miss the chance to make your stairs do double or triple duty. The under-stair space can be fitted out with storage, a resting place, a desk, or even an indoor garden. Stairwells can also work as lightwells, and as an integral part of the passive thermal design of the house: like many designers, Steffen uses them as thermal chimneys, explaining that "in winter they bring warm air upstairs and reduce the need for heating, in summer they can draw hot air from downstairs to outside and keep the house cool." Where possible, it can also be a good idea to have a door at the top or bottom of the stairs to allow thermal and acoustic zoning of the house when required.

"A stair can double as a bookshelf, have a tread become a benchtop, allow views and a sense of connection to other spaces, or provide beautiful detailing in line with other joinery in the design," says Shae. Terry agrees: "I like to use them for light and ventilation when you have sites that do not offer great opportunities for those."

Give some thought to future-proofing the design, too, if possible. While acknowledging the difficulty of accommodating accessibility in multi-level homes, Shae says that providing wide, non-slip, straight-run stairs should allow for the future installation of chair lifts; another option is to plan in space for an elevator if it's ever needed. 5

TOP TIPS FROM THE EXPERTS:

"Don't miss a design opportunity to do something different. Think of your stairs as a chance to create a visually stunning feature in a room, the focal point to plan the house around. Choose the material and design depending on whether you need light access, ventilation, and so on."

– Terry Bail, Archology

"See a stair as a multi-purpose object and incorporate other uses – think of thermal performance, storage, a play or resting spot underneath, incorporate a slide if you dare. And make comfort a priority – if you can, make them wider and shallower so they are comfortable to walk on."

– Steffen Welsch

"Consider stairs as an opportunity for an exciting and beautiful design element - they can be so much more than a utility or forgotten design opportunity!"

– Shae Parker McCashen, Green Sheep Collective



Part of a renovation to a single-fronted terrace house with a party wall on the north side, this staircase was deliberately located on the north boundary as a way of getting north light down into the living areas below. "Council wouldn't let us put a north-facing window on the boundary, so instead we glazed the roof to the stair and put an external automated blind over it to protect from excess sun," explains designer Ande Bunbury. As the stair runs alongside the kitchen, she decided to make the space underneath work hard as a "wall of storage" including fridge and pantry. The stair is constructed of recycled messmate with a Livos oil finish. Image: Ben Hosking